

CTESIAS AND HIS EUNUCHS: A CHALLENGE FOR MODERN HISTORIANS¹

Abstract: The prominence of eunuchs in Ctesias' account of Persia has given rise in the last decades to a paradoxical combination of scepticism about their historicity and realistic interpretation questioning whether they were in fact castrated. The present paper brings to light the difficulties of the assessment of them as historical figures. It first takes into account the fact that we know Ctesias' eunuchs only through fragments, that is, through the filter of later authors who refer to him while possibly having a personal relationship to eunuchs in their own society. It then describes the distinctive features of Ctesias' eunuchs within Greek literature on Persia and presents the main interpretative trends on them. It examines possible touchstones and shows how difficult it is to cross-check Ctesias' account of eunuchs with Near Eastern evidence. It assesses the foundations of current prevailing positions, and shows that a hypothesis has become a—questionable—dogma on two sorts of historical referents for Ctesias' εὐνοῦχοι. Last, it questions the pertinence of 'orientalism' as a label for the representation of eunuchs in Ctesias' account, and even highlights its shortcomings. All in all, this issue is in fact a perfect illustration of the methodological problems that modern historians often have to face when they try to study ancient Persia through the accounts of Greek historians.

It is curious that a phenomenon which was so important in so many major civilizations has been virtually taboo in modern scholarship².
 I such were some of the concluding words of A. K. Grayson's paper on eunuchs and their role in Assyrian bureaucracy. By contrast, it could be said that it is something like a modern *topos* on Achaemenid Persia as seen by Greeks, especially by Ctesias of Cnidus. The latter had been a Greek physician at the Persian court at the end of the fifth century BC, and he wrote a *Persica*, which is known only through fragments, mainly through a summary of it by Photius. The *Persica* was an extensive history of the Persian Empire, which in fact went back to the Assyrian and Median Empires, before dealing

¹ A first version of this paper was presented at Trinity College, Dublin, in June 2010, at a conference organised by Anne Fitzpatrick and Diana Edelman on *Assessing Biblical and Classical Sources for the Reconstruction of Persian Influence, History and Culture*, and a French version was also presented in Strasbourg in February 2011 in the *Séminaire de recherche d'histoire ancienne* organised by Cédric Brélaz. I would like to thank the colleagues who offered me these opportunities, as well as the audience for various questions. The paper has been expanded on some points since then, and among its readers I am especially grateful to Guido Schepens for his invaluable suggestions and advice for this publication, as well as to John Marincola, John Moles and the two anonymous *Histos* referees for their efficient contribution and helpful comments.

² Grayson (1995) 97.

with the successive Persian kings from Cyrus to Artaxerxes II. It detailed wars of conquest, local revolts, court intrigues, and succession crises. This narrative admittedly was also in many respects confused and beset by stereotypes and sensational aspects. Its interpretation is all the more controversial as we mostly lack Near Eastern evidence with which it could be cross-checked. By contrast, the fragments of Ctesias' *Persica* can be partially compared with Herodotus' history, which had been written some decades earlier, and their divergences have been diversely interpreted by modern scholars. In any case, no historian of Achaemenid Persia can avoid Ctesias' account, especially for the period of eighty years after Herodotus' history stops. And at the same time, Ctesias has been, is, and is probably going to remain a most controversial source.³

Among the characteristic features of his account is the omnipresence of eunuchs at the Persian court: these figures play a prominent role as attendants of the royal family, often exercise influence on its members, and some of them even take part in intrigues and plots. This feature has become a cliché in modern scholarship: it suffices merely to drop the word 'eunuch', as a rule with a sarcastic smile full of hidden meaning, to throw suspicion on Ctesias' narrative as an account disfigured by invention, misinterpretation, malicious intent, and 'orientalism'. This is obviously intimidating, since someone who believes that Ctesias' eunuchs might have been historical figures runs the risk of being accused of orientalism, or of 'recolonising' Persian history, or of just being uncritical, and nobody would like that. Such a predicament, however, should not hide the many debates which are involved in the assessment of the role of eunuchs in Persian history.

In fact, in recent times, some respectable hypotheses have become virtual dogmas and, in addition to some lack of caution, there are obvious inconsistencies in the scholarly view that rejects Ctesias' account as a mere fiction *and*, at the same time, maintains that his eunuchs should be interpreted as non-castrated dignitaries—a qualification which may seem very odd indeed, if these are in fact fictional figures. In this paper, I shall try first to describe the place and main characteristics of Ctesias' eunuchs, in order to see what their distinctive features are and what questions they evoke. I shall then present the main interpretative trends, and discuss the possible touchstones (including other pieces of evidence and comparative material), which are associated with the debates, or, in some cases, which should be associated with the debates. I hope to show that the historical background of these

³ Edition, French translation and commentary of Ctesias' *Persica*: Lenfant (2004). Introduction and English translation: Llewellyn-Jones and Robson (2010); Stronk (2010). Summary and bibliography on Ctesias as a source on the Persian Empire: Lenfant (2011) 96–107.

figures is less self-evident and more complex than is usually held. Beyond the question of interpreting the literary or historical figures of eunuchs, this paper intends to exemplify some of the methodological issues which modern scholars have to face when trying to study Persia through Greek eyes.

1. Assessing Ctesias' Eunuchs Through Fragments

The first difficulty to face is to take into account the fact that Ctesias' *Persica* is known only through the filter of other authors who refer to him when they allegedly draw on him: the passages that include such a reference are possible paraphrases or summaries of a part of Ctesias' work, which modern scholars call 'fragments' of it. Now these pieces can give a misleading idea of the original work, since later authors, who did not even pretend to give an accurate and complete idea of the original contents, made a personal selection of data, which they use and rewrite in ways which suit their own purposes.⁴

This means that studying eunuchs in Ctesias is not like studying them in Herodotus or Xenophon. One has to wonder about the perception of eunuchs in a diachronic perspective, since the authors who refer to Ctesias sometimes wrote centuries or even more than a thousand years later, and lived in societies where eunuchs were not always past, foreign, or fictional figures. In addition to that historical background, which may have conditioned their attention to, or interpretation of eunuchism, one has to consider their literary purpose and their general method when they draw on Ctesias' text.⁵ It is not enough to say that an author should be used with care (in fact, they all should), but one must assess with some degree of probability if, and where, each author preserving fragments of Ctesias and providing some details on eunuchs could have produced inventions of his own or given to those figures a place out of proportion with the one they had in Ctesias' *Persica*. Let us make it clear that inventing does not necessarily mean introducing the figure of a eunuch that was not in the original, but rather reshaping it with other features or valuing it in another way.

Such an assessment of these authors' capacity to reflect Ctesias' *Persica* may be based on three main types of clues: (1) their general literary methods and their use of Ctesias' work; (2) their usual picture of eunuchs, when they do not draw upon Ctesias; and (3) the comparison with parallel and inde-

⁴ See the basic reflections of Schepens (1997) and Lenfant (1999a), with bibliography and a telling demonstration of what we would know about Herodotus if we only had fragments.

⁵ See Lenfant (2004) CLXXXII–CXC, Stronk (2010) 67–70, 82–3, 103, 146, 148.

pendent fragments from other authors referring to Ctesias. An examination along these lines is probably the only way to know whether and how their rendering of Ctesias' eunuchs has been affected by their backgrounds, intentions or personal judgements.

Eunuchs are mainly mentioned in fragments transmitted by (in chronological order) Diodorus, Nicolaus of Damascus, Plutarch, Athenaeus, and Photius. Among them, Diodorus, Nicolaus and Athenaeus in fact refer to eunuchs belonging to the Assyrian and Median Empires, whereas Plutarch and Photius set eunuchs in the history of the Persian Empire properly speaking. Even if our focus is on Persia, the picture of eunuchs in the Assyrian and Median Empires remains of interest, because these Empires were partially seen by Ctesias as analogous forerunners of the Persian Empire.⁶

Like most authors, Diodorus does not actually quote Ctesias' text, undeniably his main source in his Book 2 on Assyria, but he rewrites and summarises selected episodes which in his view deserve to be remembered, and he sometimes adds elements taken from other sources or comments of his own.⁷ Unlike other authors, Diodorus did not live in a society where eunuchs were banal or influential. In the fourteen other preserved books of his universal history, there are only a few scattered allusions to individual eunuchs, who belong more or less to the Persian Empire: three of them are regicides, whereas one by contrast shows affection for his king beyond the latter's death.⁸ In each case Diodorus draws on a different source, and his regicides are also recorded by other authors. In other words, they are not invented by Diodorus. As for the moral qualifications, if Bagoas is wicked (*πονηρός*) and the faithful servant 'loving his master' (*φιλοδέσποτος*), these stereotypes are not specific to Diodorus either.⁹ In a word, these rare allusions do not convey the impression that Diodorus would have a special interest in eunuchs, a tendency to invent some such figures, or to picture or consider them in a specific way.

His Book 2 mainly drawing on Ctesias mentions several eunuchs belonging to the Assyrian court, that of Semiramis, her son Ninyas, and her last successor Sardanapalos.¹⁰ One of them takes part in a plot against the queen

⁶ See Lenfant (2004) LII–LIII.

⁷ For more details on Diodorus and Ctesias, see Bigwood (1980); Eck (2003) XIII–XVIII, XLVIII–L; Lenfant (2004) CLXXXIII–CLXXXIV; Stronk (2010) 64–70.

⁸ Mithridates, murderer of Xerxes: Diod. 11.69.1. Nicocles (*sic*), murderer of Evagoras of Salamis: 15.47.8. Bagoas, successively murderer of kings Ochos and Oarses, before plotting against their successor Darius: 17.5.3–6. See below. Eunuch showing affection for Darius III: 17.66.4–5.

⁹ See below.

¹⁰ Semiramis: Ctes. F 1b §20.1. Ninyas: F 1b §21.2. Sardanapalos: F 1b §24.4; 27.2; 28.3.

Semiramis, whereas the others are the only ones, with the king's wives and concubines, who have the ability to see a king (Ninyas, Sardanapalos) who always remains inside his palace. Eunuchs belong to the king (Sardanapalos has them burnt with himself and his concubines),¹¹ and they know what is happening inside the palace, and so are therefore indispensable partners for anyone seeking access to the king. These mentions of eunuchs are not many, nor do they include any value judgement. Furthermore, parallel and independent fragments of Ctesias include similar details on eunuchs—which suggests that they go back to their common source.¹² In a word, even if Diodorus does not fail to note when a figure is a eunuch, there is nothing to suggest that he would have done anything more than reproduce some details of his source.

A few decades later, Nicolaus of Damascus also composes a universal history,¹³ and he also rewrites some portions of Ctesias' history of Assyria and Media, but, unlike Diodorus, he probably expands rather than summarises.¹⁴ The passages in question are known through the *Excerpta Constantiniana*, the tenth century collection of excerpts of Greek historical works selected for their moral interest. Now the only allusions to eunuchs within the preserved books of the *Excerpta*, as well as among Nicolaus' fragments, are to be found in the five fragments which draw upon Ctesias.¹⁵ Although the partial transmission of both *corpora* requires caution, there is nothing to suggest a special interest in eunuchs which would be due to Nicolaus' additions: in his fragments, eunuchs play minor roles, just as in parallel fragments from other authors.¹⁶

¹¹ Ctes. F 1b §27.2.

¹² Ctes. F 11δ* (Nic. Dam.): eunuch plotting against Semiramis. F 1n and F 1πα (Ath.): only eunuchs and women may see Ninyas and Sardanapalos, who can only be observed by Arbaces with the help of a eunuch. F 1q (Ath.): Sardanapalos' eunuchs are the only ones to know the causes of the fire.

¹³ See now the French translation, with introduction and Greek text, by Parmentier and Barone (2011).

¹⁴ On Nicolaus and Ctesias, see Lenfant (2000); ead. (2004) CLXXXIV; Stronk (2010), esp. 82–3.

¹⁵ F 11δ*: plot against Semiramis. F 1πε*: Arbaces can see Sardanapalos thanks to a eunuch. F 6b*: Nanaros and Parsondes (with unparalleled elements: a eunuch prepares the singing women of the court; another, who has been struck and mutilated by his master Nanaros, betrays him and reveals his crime to the king; Nanaros takes refuge in the most powerful of his eunuchs, who successfully speaks his cause before the king). F 8c*: Stryangaeus is advised by the most faithful of his eunuchs to declare his love to Zarinaia, and he later gives him a last letter to her. F 8d*: the eunuch Artembares, who serves the king of Media, adopts Cyrus who is cupbearer; eunuchs are also messengers to the king.

¹⁶ For what concerns eunuchs, there are only parallels for the two first fragments.

The third author drawing on Ctesias' account of Assyria about eunuchs is Athenaeus. His *Deipnosophists* includes plenty of quotations or paraphrases of Greek literature of the classical and Hellenistic periods, which were chosen to illustrate specific themes linked to the symposium and are supposed to be told by learned guests at a banquet.¹⁷ There are about twelve mentions of eunuchs in the fifteen books of the work. Now when Athenaeus was writing at the end of the 2nd c. AD, court eunuchs had been rather common in the Roman Empire for two centuries.¹⁸ This does not have any sort of repercussion, however, in the *Deipnosophists*, except for the fact that eunuchs are perhaps seen as unsurprising. True, the focus is on the past, but even when a learned banqueter such as Larensis laments the luxury introduced by Lucullus among the Romans (6.274e–275a), his lengthy comments focusing on slaves (6.262b–272d) do not even mention eunuchs.

The three mentions of eunuchs in the *Deipnosophists* that go back to Ctesias occur in paraphrases¹⁹ of the *Persica* (12.528e–529c) on Ninyas and Sardanapalos, where eunuchs play the minor part that we have already seen.²⁰ Although these are paraphrases, the details on eunuchs should not be suspected of being invented by Athenaeus, because (1) the latter has no special interest in eunuchs, and (2) independent fragments of Diodorus and Nicolaus provide parallel testimonies. These allusions nevertheless occur in a sequence on *τροφή*, a central moral theme in Athenaeus, and the precise focus of Book 12. Now that interpretative framework and the value judgement included are due to Athenaeus rather than to Ctesias:²¹ nothing, indeed, suggests that the latter considered eunuchs as demonstrating the *τροφή* of their owners.²²

All this seems to indicate that the authors referring to Ctesias are rather faithful when they represent him as attributing only various minor roles to eunuchs in Assyrian events. As to the Persian Empire properly speaking, we now turn to Plutarch and Photius.

In Plutarch's *Life of Artaxerxes*, it is generally difficult to determine whether he borrows a detail from Ctesias:²³ he draws on several sources, se-

¹⁷ On Athenaeus' methods as a transmitter of fragments see Lenfant (2007).

¹⁸ Guyot (1980) 121–4.

¹⁹ On the phrases specific to either quotations or paraphrases, see Lenfant (2007) 50–3.

²⁰ Ninyas could only be seen by his eunuchs and wives (12.528e), and the same was true for Sardanapalos, whom Arbaces could only observe thanks to the help of a eunuch (528f). Sardanapalos' eunuchs were the only ones to know the truth about his pyre (529c).

²¹ See Lenfant (2007) 60–2.

²² See, on the contrary, Ath. 12.514d referring to Clearchus of Soli.

²³ On Plutarch and Ctesias, see Lenfant (2004) CLXXXVIII–IX; Stronk (2010) esp. 103.

lects and elaborates data according to his own goals as a biographer and a moralist, and often refers to an authority for a detail, so that the delimitation of the borrowing is not an easy task. Plutarch does not as a rule offer quotations separate from his own words, so that a fragment provided by Plutarch can legitimately be suspected of being an inextricable mixture. Yet his allusions to eunuchs do not put us in a real dilemma in this respect: in a part of his account explicitly going back to Ctesias,²⁴ Plutarch mentions the eunuchs who are near Cyrus the Younger at Cunaxa and try to save his life; there follows a passage that could also go back to Ctesias,²⁵ where eunuchs are weep over Cyrus' death, and another eunuch provides water to the king.²⁶ Later on, eunuchs of the king and of his mother take part in a common dinner, where 'the most influential of Parysatis' eunuchs' (ὁ μέγιστον δυνάμενος τῶν Παρυσάτιδος εὐνούχων) sets a trap for the one who killed Cyrus.²⁷ And finally, the king's eunuch who had cut off the head and the hand of Cyrus is won by Parysatis in playing dice with the king.²⁸

Given the fact that Plutarch is often critical of barbarians (whom he is prone to depict in a stereotyped contrast with Greek values),²⁹ and repeatedly makes allusions to the Persian world both in his *Lives* and *Moralia*,³⁰ one might wonder if he did not sometimes use eunuchs as a convenient ingredient to portray Persia. In fact, even if there were eunuchs in the Roman world of his time, they are not significantly present in his work as a whole:³¹ his eunuchs nearly always belong to the Persian world.³² Yet outside the *Life of Artaxerxes*, they remain few. Furthermore, a comparison of this *Life* with parallel fragments from Photius suggests that Plutarch was not especially keen on identifying some of his figures as eunuchs: whereas Photius specifies that the king had his mother's eunuchs (εὐνοῦχοι) tortured, Plutarch refers to the latter as 'attendants and table waiters' (ὑπερέται καὶ τραπεζοκόμοι);³³ in the same way, according to Photius, Parysatis had palm-trees planted by her

²⁴ *Art.* 11.1 and 11.11 (Ctes. F 20).

²⁵ Lenfant (2004) 282 n. 688.

²⁶ *Art.* 12 (Ctes. F 20)

²⁷ *Art.* 15–16 (Ctes. F 26, §15–6).

²⁸ *Art.* 17 (Ctes. F 26, §17).

²⁹ Schmidt (1999).

³⁰ Lenfant (2011) 293–323.

³¹ Some eunuchs occur in the events surrounding Mithridates and Pompey more than a century earlier (*Luc.* 17.5 and 18, *Pomp.* 77–9, *Caes.* 48–9).

³² *Them.* 16.5; *Arist.* 9.6; *Alex.* 30; *Mor.* 92e7, 337e7.

³³ Photius: F 27 §70; Plutarch: F 29b §19.8.

eunuchs on Clearchus' tomb, whereas Plutarch does not specify who did this.³⁴ Simply put, eunuchs were not a major component of his picture of the Persian world.³⁵ Therefore he is not likely himself to have inserted eunuchs into his *Life of Artaxerxes*.

The last author to be assessed, Photius, is far from being the least important, since most of the references to eunuchs occur in his summary of Ctesias' *Persica*. In a sense, that comes as no surprise, since it provides the most extensive evidence on that lost work. But owing to the Byzantine background of the patriarch, where court eunuchs were rather common, it could be tempting to suspect Photius of having reshaped the Persian court according to his own world or personal prejudices. His method in summarising Ctesias' work has already been assessed both through studying his treatment of some preserved works and through a comparison with parallel fragments provided by Plutarch: this has revealed some slight confusions, some misleading shortenings, some surprising omissions, even some disproportion in the abridgement of the diverse parts of the summarised work, and a predilection for sensational aspects; but no additions have been found.³⁶ If this may be applied to eunuchs, it would mean that Photius did not himself insert them into his summary, but that he could choose to mention them more systematically than others did. Yet because of the presence of eunuchs at the Byzantine court, we should also wonder whether Photius had a special relationship to and a particular opinion of or feelings towards them as a category. It might be enlightening to consider in detail Photius' relationship to the eunuchs of his own society. This, however, goes beyond my competence and the scope of the present paper, and I will content myself with a few remarks on a matter that deserves further consideration. Eunuchs were prominent figures in Byzantine society, both at the imperial court (either as servants or as officials) and in the Orthodox Church (as monks or even as patriarchs).³⁷ And, as a man who successively had a high position in the Byzantine bureaucracy and was elected patriarch, Photius was himself familiar with both areas. Before him, the patriarch of Constantinople was the eunuch Ignatius, and Empress Theodora also had the eunuch Theoctistos as

³⁴ Photius: F 27 §71. Plutarch: F 28 §8.

³⁵ Eunuchs have no special place in Schmidt (1999).

³⁶ On Photius' method, see Hägg (1975) esp. 108–11, 154–5, who compared ten *codices* of Photius' *Bibliotheca* with their extant models without finding any real additions on his part. On the characteristics of Photius' abridgement of Ctesias: Lenfant (2004) CLXXXIV–VIII. See also Stronk (2010) 143–4, 146.

³⁷ Ringrose (2003); Tougher (2008), whose final select prosopography shows that this was also true for the 9th century.

her principal advisor.³⁸ When Photius was replaced by Ignatius, he was banished,³⁹ and during his removal from patriarchal office the eunuch Baanes was a trusted agent of Emperor Basil I.⁴⁰ We should add that in a letter sent to the court eunuch John Angourios, Photius, who accused him of laughing during a church service, reviled him as a eunuch, and referred to common stereotypes of invective such as comparing him with γάλλοι or calling him ἀνδρόγυννος (*Ep.* 50).⁴¹

It is not easy to draw some direct conclusions from this, especially because the *Bibliotheca* was certainly composed before some of these events. Yet even this superficial survey gives an idea of the familiarity of Photius with eunuchs, and of his possible involvement with some of them in real life: this is what sets him apart from other main authorities who offer ‘quotations’ from Ctesias’ *Persica*.

What matters here is whether such views and feelings could affect the way Photius reports on the eunuchs who appeared in the works he summarised. Apart from the summary dealing with Ctesias, eunuchs are mentioned in nine further codices. Five of these concern later Roman or Byzantine history,⁴² three deal with Hellenistic fictions,⁴³ and there is only one which refers to the Persian period, but in fact concerns Cyprus.⁴⁴ Eunuchs do not take up much space in the summaries of Hellenistic novels, especially in that of Philostratus’ *Vita Apollonii* (241), which includes very few allusions to eunuchs, and without any negative connotation. That of Iamblichus’ novel (94) instead records how two eunuchs sent by the king of Babylon pursue the heroes: here they figure more prominently, and as malicious characters at that, but it is worth noting that Photius specifies only once that they are eunuchs, without any insistence. Concerning Cyprus, Theopompus’ summary reports on the eunuch who was in collusion with king Evagoras and his son because they slept with Nicocles’ daughter without knowing the other had done so,

³⁸ Tougher (2008) 170.

³⁹ *ODB* s.v. Ignatios, Photios.

⁴⁰ Tougher (2008) 55.

⁴¹ Ἀνδρόγυννος is not a compliment, since Photius links it elsewhere with impiety (ἀσέβεια) and treason (473a26), but note that in the last case he does not aim at a eunuch. On his anti-eunuch invective in *Ep.* 50, see Ringrose (2003) 76–7; Tougher (2008) 103. See also Vinson (1998), esp. 488–91, on Photius’ ‘sharply differentiated and hierarchical view of gender’ and the crucial role he ascribes to sexual fertility in the identity of both genders, at least as a polemical tool.

⁴² Cod. 65, 96, 256, 257, 258.

⁴³ Cod. 94 and 241 (novels), 190 (mythography).

⁴⁴ Cod. 176 (Theopompus).

and who assassinated both of them:⁴⁵ Photius does not judge Evagoras' behaviour positively (he uses the word ἀκολασία), and this may hold true for the eunuch's assistance as well, although that remains unexpressed. By contrast, explicit and virulent value judgements can be read concerning eunuchs belonging to Byzantine society,⁴⁶ some of whom gave decisive help to traitors.⁴⁷ Obviously, these appraisals might have been already expressed by Photius' source, but even in that case the point is that he repeats them and supposedly subscribes to them. His more explicit judgement in Byzantine matters could be explained by the fact that the traitors are involved in religious fights⁴⁸ such as the ones which he could see in his own society even before he himself became a patriarch. All in all, eunuchs who occur in his summaries of works other than Ctesias' *Persica* are either bad men themselves or conniving with other bad men.

If we now turn to the summary of Ctesias, do we get a different picture? This summary is by far the one which refers most often to eunuchs and which mentions most such figures. It introduces the most influential of them by name at the accession of nearly every new king and some of them also play a part in the events of the reign, especially in plots. There is no reason to assume that Photius himself inserted this many eunuchs, but it is possible that he gave them a disproportionate place compared to the original work, possibly because of analogies with his own world. A comparison with fragments of Ctesias preserved by other authorities may be helpful in elucidating Photius' attitude. First, Photius does not express the same sort of value judgements on individual eunuchs: whereas Diodorus, Nicolaus and Plutarch speak about 'trustworthy' (πιστοί) or 'most trustworthy' (πιστότατοι) eunuchs,⁴⁹ Photius above all insists on the influence exercised by some of them, who are said to be μέγα δυνάμενοι παρὰ τῷ βασιλεῖ or δυνατώτατοι.⁵⁰ Second, in a few cases, Photius does not specify that a figure is a eunuch, whereas Plutarch does.⁵¹ It might be that he omitted to clarify the point or

⁴⁵ Photius 176 (120a38–b3) = Theopompus, *FGrHist* 115 F 103. The story is also told by Aristotle and Diodorus. See Guyot (1980) 228–9, *s.v.* 'Thrasydaios'.

⁴⁶ E.g., 96 (83b5–6): ἄνδρα ὑπέραισχρον; 258 (479b29): ἀνδρόγυνοι εὐνοῦχοι who are accomplice (συνεργοί) of the lie of a wretched man (δείλαιος). Ἀνδρόγυνος is obviously a pejorative word in Photius' mind (see his *Lexicon* and the *Letter* 50 quoted above).

⁴⁷ E.g., 257 (474a28), 258 (479b29).

⁴⁸ E.g., the heretic supporters of Arius (cod. 256, 257, 258).

⁴⁹ E.g., F 1πε*, F8c*, F 26 §17 (Stateira's word).

⁵⁰ F 9 §6, F 13 §§9, 24, 33, F 15 §§51, 54.

⁵¹ Photius does not indicate that Satibarzanes is a eunuch (F 16 §60), unlike Plutarch (F 20 §12.4). Neither does he call the man who cuts off Cyrus' head and hand a eunuch (F 16

that it was not so important. Third, there are in his summary some figures of eunuchs whose actions change somewhat, and who thus cannot be reduced to a specific judgement.⁵² At least, Photius does not express any judgement on them.

Perhaps the attention given to eunuchs by Photius can be explained, on the one hand, by his desire to highlight the contrast with Herodotus' account,⁵³ and on the other hand by his sensitivity to the part played by castrates in Byzantium. In his summary of Ctesias' work as in the others, eunuchs are not positive figures. It would probably go too far to see in that picture of a kingdom where eunuchs play a considerable part a kind of message to his contemporaries. An important point for us, however, is that for Photius eunuchs as such are neither figures of the past, nor fictional pictures, nor foreign symbols. Their constant and rather negative presence in the summary of Ctesias' work could not aim at representing otherness. In other words, by a sort of paradox, these eunuchs whom some modern scholars see as a component of an orientalist picture of the Persian world only strike us today in this way because of what they meant for a man who was next to eunuchs in his own society and did not classify them as 'oriental' or even 'foreign'.

In what follows, we shall have to take into account these features of each of Ctesias' readers, and to remain especially cautious about the origin of any value judgement. In the whole corpus of fragments, eunuchs are, however, pictured with enough details and in a sufficiently coherent manner to make an overall examination possible.

§66), unlike Plutarch F 26 §17 (Bagapates/Masabates). We have observed opposite cases above.

⁵² The Bagapates who lived under the reigns of Cambyses, the Magus and Darius (F 13) or Artoxares under Artaxerxes I, Sekyndianos and Darius II (F 14 §42–F 15 §54).

⁵³ Photius proves especially attentive to Ctesias' divergences with Herodotus: cf. Lenfant (2004) CLXXXVIII.

2. Place and Main Features of Eunuchs in Ctesias' Account

2.1 The nature of εὐνοῦχοι

First of all, what I call eunuch is called εὐνοῦχος in Greek (plural εὐνοῦχοι).⁵⁴ Etymologically, the εὐνοῦχος is the one who keeps (-ουχος) the bed (εὐνή).⁵⁵ It seems to define him with a function (protector of the bed), whereas words such as ἐκτομίας, which recall castration more directly, are rarely used.⁵⁶

In fact, castration (ἐκτέμνειν) is sometimes alluded to by Herodotus, above all in the story of Hermotimos, that Greek who was captured in war and enslaved, before being bought and castrated by a Greek trader in order to be sold to Persians at a better price.⁵⁷ In Ctesias' fragments, however, there are only indirect allusions to the condition of castrated men. In the first instance, a eunuch who is also cupbearer of the king expresses his decision to adopt a son by referring to himself as a eunuch ('I shall make him my son, although I am a eunuch').⁵⁸ But the most striking case is when Artoxares

⁵⁴ The word is attested before Ctesias, especially among Asiatic Greeks who had contact with Lydia and then with Persia, such as Hipponax (fr. 36 Degani) in the late 6th c. BC, and Herodotus and Hellanicus (*FGrHist* 687a F 7c) in the 5th c. BC. The classic study of eunuchs in Greco-Roman antiquity is Guyot (1980), which is still helpful, although it sometimes tends to confuse all sorts of sources, times and areas. Tougher (2008), although concerned with eunuchs in Byzantium, include many excellent insights not only on that period (see also Ringrose (2003) and the recent clear synthesis of Sidéris (2010)), but also on eunuchs in general in a comparative perspective. For other comparative material, see also Tougher (2002).

⁵⁵ Chantraine (2009) 368: 'gardien de la couche, eunuque'. As noted by Guyot (1980) 20, the general meaning is 'unsuited to reproduction' or, more restrictively, 'castrated' (that is, unsuited to reproduction due to an operation).

⁵⁶ These are words which refer to the mode of castration (ἐκτομίας refer to excision; the later attested θλιβίας refer to the compression of testicles). On modes of castration, see Tougher (2008) 29–31.

⁵⁷ Herodotus uses the verb ἐκτέμνω, which refers to the mutilation performed by Panionios in order to make eunuchs (8.105). In the same way, he alludes elsewhere to the castration (ἐκτέμνω) of boys from the Ionian cities, by order of the Persian generals (6.32). In both cases, the εὐνοῦχος made in this way is explicitly opposed to the ἔνορχις, the male with testicles. A second expression is used about Hermotimos' revenge on Panionios: he forces his previous master to ἀποτέμνειν τὰ αἰδοῖα, that is, to cut off the private parts, of his own sons, then he compels the latter to inflict the same on their father (8.106). Hornblower (2003) 41–3 thinks that the second expression refers to a more radical amputation (the penis would also be cut off, and not only the testicles), but it is far from certain that we should make a distinction between ἐκτέμνειν and ἀποτέμνειν τὰ αἰδοῖα. He also considers the second operation as necessarily fatal, which is contradicted, e.g., by Chinese practices.

⁵⁸ F 8d* §5–6. Note that this fragment is provided by Nicolaus, and that the belief that it goes back to Ctesias is both hypothetical and likely (see above).

the εὐνοῦχος plots against the king (Darius II) because he wishes to become king himself: he orders a woman to procure, according to Photius, ‘a beard and a moustache for him so that he could look like a man (ἀνῆρ),’⁵⁹ beardlessness being a well-known effect of castration, at least when performed before puberty.⁶⁰ The beard is a usual virile attribute in antiquity,⁶¹ and, above all, if Artoxares wants to look like a man, that clearly means that he does not look like a man, even that he *is* not a ‘man’.⁶²

2.2 Function and Role of Ctesias’ Eunuchs

Now what about the function and role of Ctesias’ eunuchs? As we have seen, according to etymology, eunuchs are ‘keepers of the bed’, but in Ctesias’ narrative they are in fact mentioned as attendants at the service of members of the royal family. It should be noted that they do not appear as guards of women. In other words, eunuchs are not ‘keepers of a harem’, the existence of which does not appear in Ctesias’ fragments. In his *Persica*, the women of the court do not seem to be especially watched over. They rather have eunuchs at their service (the mother of the king, Parysatis, has her own eunuchs) and also female servants (such as Gigis).⁶³ Eunuchs appear far more often around the kings and the men than around the women.⁶⁴ Accordingly,

⁵⁹ F 15 §54.

⁶⁰ Another physiological effect, the shrill voice, is not met with in Herodotus or Ctesias’ accounts. That could mean that in some cases they referred to post-pubertal eunuchs: Tougher (2008) 32 observes that the absence of facial hair and the unbroken voice are features of males who have been castrated prior to puberty. On the physical effects of castration, see Tougher (2008) 32–4.

⁶¹ As for Greece, remember that in Aristophanes’ *Ecclesiazusae*, the women who want to be taken for men have ‘beards sewed on’ (24–5), and the lack of a beard means either slavery or youth or effeminacy (102–4). In Ctesias’ *Persica*, several figures have no beard in order to look like a woman (thus Sardanapalos, Nanaros, Parsondes: F 1p, F 6b*). The role of the beard as a visible attribute of men as opposed to eunuchs and women is obviously not confined to antiquity: see Sidéris (2010) 85 on Byzantium.

⁶² This sharp formulation might also reveal Photius’ own conception of gender boundaries (see above), but it is not unlikely for Ctesias either, since, according to his predecessor Herodotus (8.106), Hermotimos also says that he is a man (ἀνῆρ) no more.

⁶³ Llewellyn-Jones (2002) 27 analyses eunuchs in connection with the harem and speaks of ‘harem society’ in Ctesias, although it is hardly perceptible in his fragments (and no more in Xenophon).

⁶⁴ More generally, Tougher (2008) 13 concludes his survey on eunuchs in history by saying that ‘Although in the popular imagination their presence at court is associated with the guarding of women ..., eunuchs were more likely to be found in the company of men.’

they seem to know the secrets of the rulers and can sometimes make some decisive revelations.⁶⁵

Some eunuchs assume other functions, like taking the king's corpse to Persia (F 13 §§9, 15) and also sitting beside his tomb (F 13 §23). In one case, a eunuch is also asked to take a military command.⁶⁶ Many play a role that probably exceeds any predefined function. They generally appear as advisors to the king: for nearly every reign—at least until Darius II, at the end of the 5th c.—there are eunuchs who are qualified as influential. Moreover, there are many cases of eunuchs taking part in plots or assassination attempts.⁶⁷ Some also appear as kingmakers,⁶⁸ and—as already seen—there is even one (the famous Artoxares) who aspires to kingship.

The only period which seems to be devoid of such events is the reign of Artaxerxes II, after the alleged failure of Artoxares under Darius II, precisely the time when Ctesias was living at the court. (Eunuchs are still mentioned then, but no longer in influential positions.) All in all, eunuchs are omnipresent in Ctesias' fragments, and there is at least a mention of some eunuchs under *every* Persian king from Cyrus to Artaxerxes II.⁶⁹ In other words, it is not the sign of an evolution, but is rather a *constant feature* of the royal court. Eunuchs appear as one of the major agents who play a role in the whole of Persian history as pictured by Ctesias.

Interpreting Ctesias' Eunuchs

Such a picture is obviously puzzling for a modern historian, and plenty of interpretations have been proposed: are these eunuchs purely literary creations, in fact Ctesias' inventions? Are they historical figures? Are they Per-

⁶⁵ e.g. F 13 §§13, 15: the usurpation of the Magus is revealed by a eunuch.

⁶⁶ F 13 §31: the eunuch Natacas is sent to plunder the sanctuary at Delphi (a most doubtful incident).

⁶⁷ There are at least some under Semiramis (F 1b §20.1, F 1l8*), Cyrus (F 9 §6), the Magus (F 13 §16), Xerxes I (§33), Xerxes II (F 15 §48), and Darius II (§54).

⁶⁸ The Magus rules thanks to the eunuch Bagapates (and also to Artasyras, F 13 §§15–16), and Ochos–Darius II partly becomes king thanks to the eunuch Artoxares (F 15 §50).

⁶⁹ At first glance, Darius seems to be an exception, but the eunuch Bagapates, who has helped in the plot against the Magus (F 13 §16), is said to have sat beside Darius' tomb for seven years (F 13 §23), which implies that he was a trusty servant of the king when the latter was alive.

Eunuchs were also present previously, at the Assyrian and Median courts, which, in Ctesias' account, are supposed to have preceded the Persian one and are to a large extent imagined according to the same pattern. Some are mentioned from Semiramis' reign (F 1b §20: plot of Ninyas against his mother Semiramis with the help of a eunuch), that is, not far from the beginning of Ctesias' story.

sian fictions? Do they owe their existence to Greek misunderstandings of historical figures who were in fact not castrated? Or should one or the other of these interpretations be adopted *ad hoc* according to each case? All these options have been proposed, and in order to examine them, I would now like to present the evidence which we can compare with Ctesias' account, and the conclusions which can possibly be reached in each case.

3. Eunuchs in Greek Accounts of Persian history

We first need to know how original Ctesias' story was in his own culture. We may first compare it with other Greek accounts, those before and those after it.

3.1 Before Ctesias: Herodotus

The first comparison to be made, and the one which clearly dominates scholarship, is that with Herodotus' account: this, of course, was another Greek history of Persia, which was written a generation earlier and stopped with the first years of Xerxes, whereas Ctesias went some 80 years further, to the sixth year of Artaxerxes II.

Eunuchs (εὐνοῦχοι, ἔκτομῖαι) already appear in Herodotus' account as personal attendants serving the king or his dignitaries. They take up different functions, such as servants employed in the many tasks of the royal service in the palace as well as on campaign,⁷⁰ but also as bodyguards (δορυφόροι) who can be employed as spies (κατάσκοποι) sent outside,⁷¹ royal messengers who control the access to the king,⁷² or even trustworthy agents who are given important missions by the king, such as being the guardian (φύλακος) of his sons during a dangerous trip.⁷³ This varied picture should, however, not mislead us, since there are hardly ten allusions to eunuchs in the whole work of Herodotus, and most of them could probably escape the reader. Moreover, these eunuchs never influence the king or plot against him. Some certainly become honoured at the court⁷⁴ and have a certain

⁷⁰ 3.30 (at Darius' court); 7.187 (in Xerxes' army); 8.105 (eunuchs in the court of Xerxes).

⁷¹ These bodyguards (1.113) serve in fact Harpagos under the Median rule. They are subsequently identified as eunuchs (1.117).

⁷² 3.77–8: eunuchs trying to block the way of the conspirators going against the Magus.

⁷³ 8.104: Xerxes makes Hermotimos the guardian of his illegitimate sons for their return trip after the battle of Salamis.

⁷⁴ 8.105.

freedom to move for their own business,⁷⁵ but all are trustworthy servants without pretension to exercising any form of power.

In Ctesias' *Persica*, eunuchs are far more present, and some of them also assume more important roles, including in events which had equivalents in Herodotus (for instance, the murder of the Magus).⁷⁶ It is, however, in the period which begins with Xerxes' murder and ends with the execution of Artoxares under Darius II that eunuchs are most often mentioned and above all as being most influential. But this period is not included in Herodotus and thus any comparison eludes us.

There have been two major trends in interpreting a comparison of the two accounts: the divergence could betray either a historical evolution or a historiographical evolution. In the first case (historical evolution), it would mean that until Xerxes' first years we should follow Herodotus but that for the following period we should follow Ctesias. 'Eunuch influence' would, then, begin with the late Xerxes. This trend is well illustrated by Olmstead's *History of the Persian Empire* (1948)⁷⁷ and also, despite some reservations, by Cook's *The Persian Empire* (1983).⁷⁸ For historians, this has the obvious advantage of avoiding a nearly total ignorance of the inner history of the Persian Empire after the Greco-Persian wars. But it also leads to an inconsistent use of Ctesias, who by this reckoning would invent stories with eunuchs in the period where he overlaps Herodotus, but would not in the following period. This is clearly the position of Guyot in his book on eunuchs in the Greco-Roman world.⁷⁹ In a way, one could suggest that for the later period Ctesias did not need to justify his story and prove original (assuming that such was his main goal), and/or that he had better evidence for recent times. But it remains awkward.

⁷⁵ 8.106. From Sardis, where the Persian army is, Hermotimos goes down to the coast 'on some business'.

⁷⁶ The Magus partly becomes king thanks to a eunuch (F 13 §15), he is later unmasked by another eunuch (§15), and is finally killed thanks to the complicity of a eunuch (§16). In the corresponding account of Herodotus, eunuchs are not completely absent, but they appear only once and not as efficient agents: they only try to bar the conspirators' way and are cut down (3.77).

⁷⁷ Olmstead stated, 'For the events of the last century, Ctesias gives us much information which we should otherwise seriously miss, though we must regret that he did not make better use of his opportunities' (380). Olmstead's account of Persian history after Xerxes' murder takes up that of Ctesias and reports 'eunuch influence' (267, 357), eunuchs involved in plots (289), eunuchs as royal 'favourites' (289, 355), and even as 'all-powerful' (312, on Artoxares).

⁷⁸ Cook, although first displaying distrust of Ctesias' account (22), accepts it concerning the role of eunuchs (129–30, 136).

⁷⁹ Guyot (1980) 84–91.

A second interpretative trend considers the divergence between the two Greek historians as the sign of an evolution within historiography. It has been best illustrated by a paper published in 1987 by Heleen Sancisi-Weerdenburg: according to her, modern common opinion held the Persian Empire as being decadent in the 4th c. BC, because actual rule was supposed to be that of ‘queens, queen-mothers, eunuchs and courtiers’, but such a picture, she argued, was based on a Greek historiography that had in fact ‘lost its original vigour’ and was merely repeating clichés. In a word, instead of the ‘decadence of the Empire’, Ctesias’ account would rather prove the ‘decadence in the sources’ in the 4th c. BC.⁸⁰

3.2 Historians after Ctesias

As the comparison with Herodotus alone is not a satisfying touchstone, Ctesias’ picture of eunuchs should also be compared with the evidence offered by later Greek historians.

Xenophon is a special case: although he lived at the same time as Ctesias, had a real knowledge of the Persian Empire, and wrote in some detail on its eunuchs, his *Cyropaedia* is not so much Persian history as Greek political theory, where eunuchs embody above all a model of unflinching faithfulness.⁸¹ This faithfulness is both exemplified by Panthea’s eunuchs who attend to her perfectly, and theorised by Xenophon when he explains why Cyrus chooses eunuchs as his bodyguards.⁸² Apart from these anonymous eunuchs, there is also Gadatas, an Assyrian noble whom his king has castrated and who takes revenge by helping Cyrus to defeat this king, before becoming a dignitary at the Persian court.⁸³ It could be deduced that eunuchs as bodyguards or court dignitaries were not necessarily considered unlikely or undesirable, but because of Xenophon’s original perspective in that work and the obviously fictive character of his figures, his construction does not give any indication of the role and action of real eunuchs, not even such as they were perceived by Greeks. As a consequence we had better leave the *Cyropaedia* aside for our current interests.

Ctesias’ account should rather be compared with other Greek accounts of a later period of Persian history, that is to say later *Persica* (the sources of

⁸⁰ Sancisi-Weerdenburg (1987). This trend, however, appears earlier, since Lewis (1977) 21 already reacted to such a sceptical and ironic attitude towards Ctesias’ account (‘It is customary to make fun of Ctesias when he attributes great importance to eunuchs and queens’).

⁸¹ Briant (1996) 282 = (2002) 271; Azoulay (2000); see also Azoulay (2004), esp. 367–70.

⁸² Panthea’s eunuchs: Xen. *Cyr.* 6.1.33–4, 6.4.11, 7.3.5, 7.4.14–5. Cyrus’ bodyguard: 7.5.59–65.

⁸³ Xen. *Cyr.* 5.2.28–7.5. Gadatas as a dignitary: 8.3.17–4.2.

the last chapters of Plutarch's *Artaxerxes*) and the historians of Alexander. Now in these accounts, eunuchs appear in similar roles as in Ctesias' narrative, especially involved in, or denouncing some court plots. In fact, in later *Persica* as known through Plutarch's *Artaxerxes*, eunuchs still appear as the king's personal attendants,⁸⁴ but some are also used, among others, by Ochus to convince Ariaspes to commit suicide,⁸⁵ whereas a plot against the king Artaxerxes II is also denounced by a eunuch.⁸⁶

The main figure, however, is clearly that of Bagoas, the powerful eunuch of the last decade of the Empire,⁸⁷ and his achievements recall those of Ctesias' Artoxares: like Artoxares, he was a king-maker (he secured the throne for Darius III), and, like Artoxares, he was finally executed for having tried to kill the king.⁸⁸ But, before that, he had done more than Artoxares, since he succeeded in killing another king (Ochos = Artaxerxes III) and his son and successor (Arses = Artaxerxes IV). Moreover, he also had considerable property (gardens in Babylon, a palace in Susa)⁸⁹ and he had important official functions (a military command,⁹⁰ the administration of satrapies, the function of chiliarch). Bagoas is thus a far more successful and powerful figure than Ctesias' Artoxares.

This figure has given rise to three modern interpretations. In the traditional view, Bagoas was like that. Thus, Olmstead even considered that, by killing the last able ruler (Ochus), Bagoas was no less than the one who had 'destroyed the Persian Empire'.⁹¹ In this way, Bagoas may appear as being at the end of an evolution, of which a step could be observed in the earlier time described by Ctesias. According to a second interpretation, Bagoas is, for the most part, a literary fiction, which would be an amplification of the cli-

⁸⁴ Dinon, *FGrHist* 690 F 12a; Heracleides of Cyme, *FGrHist* 689 F 2.

⁸⁵ Plut. *Art.* 30.4.

⁸⁶ Plut. *Art.* 29.1.

⁸⁷ See Heckel (2006) 67.

⁸⁸ Diod. 17.5.3–6.

⁸⁹ If the Artahšar mentioned in the Murašû archive refers to the same person as Ctesias' Artoxares (Lewis (1977) 21), the estates he owned are a further common feature with Bagoas.

⁹⁰ Note that Bagoas was not alone in acting as a military commander (at Sidon and in Egypt in 350/49 BC): when Alexander arrived at Gaza in 332, the defence was conducted during two months by another eunuch, Batis (Heckel (2006) 71).

⁹¹ Olmstead (1948) 489: 'Bloodthirsty as Ochus had shown himself to be, he was an able ruler, and it is not too far wrong to say that, by his murder, Bagoas destroyed the Persian Empire.'

ché which had been spread by Ctesias.⁹² And for a third—median—trend, Bagoas is a historical figure, but he was not a eunuch, especially since he was a chiliarch, a major office at the Persian court.⁹³

As can be seen, Greek accounts later than Ctesias do not solve the problem.⁹⁴ Instead, they have given rise to similar controversies,⁹⁵ and we can observe for Ctesias' eunuchs the same type of interpretative trends, which I will now comment upon.

4. The Persians' Eunuchs as a Greek Fiction

The first interpretative trend consists in seeing Ctesias' eunuchs as a (more or less) Greek fiction.

4.1 A Greek Cliché in General

After centuries in which Greek literature on Persia was mostly accepted at face value, the twentieth century introduced a more critical approach.⁹⁶ For some decades, eunuchs clearly appeared as a constitutive element of the Greek picture of the barbarian world.⁹⁷ Such a portrayal of the barbarians was in large part a disparaging picture of alleged cultural and political contrasts with Greece, and its elaboration was analysed as a process of construction of Greek ethnic identity by opposition.⁹⁸

Within such a framework, eunuchs appear to be highly symbolic, as they first appear as a sort of slave, and the Persian Empire was often pictured by Greeks as the place where there was a contrast between an all-powerful king and his subjects described as slaves.⁹⁹ They are furthermore mutilated men—and mutilation was certainly in Greek eyes a striking part of the cul-

⁹² Pirngruber (2011) 283–4. This view is based on the doubtful assumption that Ctesias' account would have had a huge influence and that the historians of Alexander would have just invented instead of reporting local hearsay.

⁹³ Briant (1996) 286, 288 (= Briant (2002) 274–5, 277).

⁹⁴ It might also be noted that in these later accounts eunuchs appear in new roles related to sex, either as keepers of the numerous concubines of the king (Curtius) or as themselves available for an erotic relation with the king (Tiridates, loved by Artaxerxes II, according to Ael. *VH* 12.1; Bagoas, successively lover of Darius III and Alexander (Curt. 6.5.22)).

⁹⁵ In Bagoas' case, however, the prevailing view is clearly the first one.

⁹⁶ See Briant (2000); Lenfant (2011) 5–14.

⁹⁷ Hutzfeldt (1999) *passim*.

⁹⁸ Hall (1989).

⁹⁹ E.g. Isoc. *Paneg.* 150–1; [Arist.] *Mund.* 398a.

tural antagonism between Persia and Greece.¹⁰⁰ Last, they are not real men,¹⁰¹ and they might contribute in this way to representing the Persian Empire as effeminate, that is to say, weak.¹⁰² In that sense, eunuchs fed Greek literary clichés on Persia as early as the 5th c. BC.

4.2 Ctesias' Touch

Ctesias amplifies this trend (in no other work do eunuchs figure so prominently), and he certainly adds some new features. Generally speaking, he often challenges the common categories: in his book on India, he blurs the distinctions between animals and men, and in his *Persica* he does the same with gender boundaries. Eunuchs look neither (totally) male nor (merely) female. Moreover, the theme of an effeminate world is especially well developed in Ctesias' Assyrian and Median history: there you can find effeminate men (Sardanapalos) and virile women (Semiramis), and even changes of men into women (Nanaros). Then, in his Persian history, eunuchs and women of the royal family continue to give Asia a feminine aspect.¹⁰³ Let us add that eunuchs appear in Ctesias' account among the many dangers to the king's power, as do rebels or other figures who want to seize power.¹⁰⁴ For these reasons, some scholars tend to see these eunuchs as ideological constructions, resulting from so-called 'orientalist' Greek prejudices that tend to depreciate Persian power and culture.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁰ Lenfant (1999b) 208. Alexander's encounter with mutilated Greeks near Persepolis is a literary illustration of this opposition. Yannick Muller is currently working on a PhD about Greek views and practices of mutilation; see already Muller (forthcoming).

¹⁰¹ As seen above, it is clearly expressed about Artoxares, who needs a beard to look like a man. (Note incidentally that he is not effeminate enough to sew and appeals to a woman for this.) Later, Aristotle identified eunuchs with women (*Gen. an.* 5.3.783b–784a; cf. Tougher (2008) 34–5). On eunuchs as effeminate in Greek and, above all, Roman literature, see Guyot (1980) 37–42.

¹⁰² See especially Hall (1989) 157: 'The palace eunuch of the Greeks' imagination encapsulates their systematic feminisation of Asia; emotional, wily, subservient, luxurious, and emasculated, he embodies simultaneously all the various threads in the fabric of their orientalist discourse'; Hall (1993) 116 even states that 'the Eastern castrated male ... stood as a paradigm for every oriental male'—which is, to say the least, exaggerated.

¹⁰³ Blurring distinctions between men and animals: Lenfant (1999b) 210–3, ead. (2004) CLV, where Ctesias is contrasted with Herodotus. Blurring gender distinctions: Lenfant (2004) CXXXV–VI. See also Gera (2007). Sardanapalos has common features with eunuchs, since he has his beard shaved and his skin smoothed with pumice stone (F 1pa). This leads Arbaces to despise him as worthless (F 1b §24). Nanaros: F 6b*.

¹⁰⁴ Lenfant (2004) CXII–CXXIII.

¹⁰⁵ For Sancisi-Weerdenburg (1987) 43–4, Ctesias might be credited with introducing in Greek and European historiography the ideological and depreciative notion of the Ori-

4.3 Questions Regarding a Cliché

Identifying eunuchs as a Greek cliché about Persia, however, does not solve everything, and it rather raises several questions. First, the question of truth: is a cliché necessarily wrong? Of course, nobody contests that there were eunuchs (that is, castrated men) at the Persian court, so that the question becomes: What is wrong with the Greek (or Ctesias') cliché? Is it the alleged power and influence of eunuchs? Are we to think that Ctesias was wrong in every case, or that he generalised some individual cases?

Second, the question of evaluation: were eunuchs, in Ctesias' eyes, bad men deserving contempt? It is generally said that Ctesias pictured eunuchs as treacherous,¹⁰⁶ but this is an assertion of modern scholars, not backed by Ctesias' fragments, which describe eunuchs as 'most influential' (*δυνατώτατοι, μέγα δυνάμενοι παρά τινι*) or 'most trustworthy' (*πιστότατοι*), and we have seen that these labels even differ according to the authorities preserving fragments. To be sure, Ctesias' eunuchs are involved in plots and instances of treason, but they are not alone in doing so: among the traitors are also members of the aristocracy and the royal family (such as Megabyzus or Cyrus the Younger). Above all, in most cases, eunuchs are involved either by helping or by denouncing the plotters, but, if a plot was being hatched, was there a third possible choice? Let us add that some eunuchs are also remarkably trustworthy, sometimes beyond death.

True, contempt toward eunuchs of Persia is expressed by Greek or Latin authors, but it is by other writers, such as Plato or the historians of Alexander. Some of the latter expressed contempt for eunuchs as such (like the Roman Curtius, 3.3.23) or described some of them as especially dark (like Diodorus picturing Bagoas). Yet their characterisations are linked to a specific context¹⁰⁷ or to a specific person. They do not tell us whether eunuchs were in Ctesias' eyes a theme for disparagement. Of course, opinions may remain unexpressed all the more since they seem obvious within the frame of a common value system. But does every Greek author share the same values as every other Greek? One may doubt it, just thinking about Herodotus or Xenophon. The fact that Ctesias was not a typical Greek, neither in

ent, which she defines as provoking 'associations of harems, eunuchs, luxury and intrigues. It has connotations of softness, closedness, indulgence and lack of rigour. To sum this up: it means effeminacy'. See also, e.g., Hall (1989) 157; ead. (1993); Briant (1996) 16 = (2002) 7; Rollinger (2007).

¹⁰⁶ Briant (1996) 279 = (2002) 268: 'perfidious eunuchs'. Azoulay (2000) 23 states that the Greek world was used to considering eunuchs, especially with Ctesias, as treacherous and always ready to betray.

¹⁰⁷ On Curtius' words, see below.

terms of experience nor by his literary undertaking, should also invite some caution. Some of his representations seem rather to challenge the common opinion. It is, in fact, risky to postulate unexpressed intentions, and, as far as we can see from his fragments, Ctesias—unlike Plato or Curtius—did not express contempt for eunuchs as such.

A third question concerns the Greekness of the cliché. Is that stereotyped picture of eunuchs only a Greek cliché, is it more widely a foreign cliché, or could it in fact also be a Persian cliché? As seen above, some scholars have ascribed the picture of eunuchs around the king to Greek ‘ideology’ or orientalisising imagination, but this is far from being self-evident.¹⁰⁸ True, other foreign views could be compared, especially books of the Hebrew Bible, such as *Esther*, where eunuchs¹⁰⁹ are to be seen both as attendants of the king Ahasuerus (1.10) and as plotters against the king (2.21). Unfortunately, the date of composition is uncertain, just as is its inspiration, since some scholars hold it to be a Hellenistic novel inspired by Greek literature, while according to others the story would have had its origins in folk-tales, and Mesopotamian folk-tales rather than Greek ones.¹¹⁰ That leaves open the question of a foreign cliché that would be equivalent to the Greek one and at the same time completely independent of it.

At least, one might wonder if the picture of eunuchs could not be also a Persian cliché. That should not be *a priori* excluded. In fact, the terms which morally describe eunuchs in Ctesias’ account are most banal,¹¹¹ and it should be noted that exactly the same have been used about court eunuchs in every civilisation with court eunuchs, in the later Roman and Byzantine Empires¹¹² as well as in Imperial China.¹¹³ Such an analogy suggests two things: first,

¹⁰⁸ For a critical view on the orientalist approach of Ctesias’ *Persica*, see Llewellyn-Jones and Robson (2010) 80–7.

¹⁰⁹ Note that ‘eunuch’ is here a translation of the Hebrew *saris* (itself translated as *εὐνοῦχος* in the *Septuagint*), which is alternatively interpreted as ‘royal official’ (e.g. Kuhrt (2007) 594, 636), in which case it would not (necessarily) refer to eunuchs. Cf. below on the Akkadian *ša rēšī*.

¹¹⁰ See Macchi (2007) for the first view, Berlin (2001) for the second. See also Kuhrt (2007) 10.

¹¹¹ On the coexistence of a negative stereotype (the treacherous eunuch) with a positive one (the devoted servant) in Greek writings on Persia (not limited to Ctesias), cf. Briant (1996) 279–84 (= (2002) 268–72) and Kuhrt (2007) 577 and 588–90.

¹¹² Cf. Tougher (2008) 96: ‘Eunuchs could be presented as utterly treacherous as well as utterly loyal’, and the whole chapter on ‘Images and identities of eunuchs’, with Byzantine negative and positive views of eunuchs.

¹¹³ Jay (1993), esp. 460–3; Dan Shi (1995) 192 (utmost devotion) and Perront’s introduction at p. 22 (treacherousness).

that such a cliché is not inextricably bound with a foreign view and an ethnic prejudice (in Byzantium and Imperial China it was spread among native people); second, that there could be universal clichés concerning court eunuchs, simply due to their condition and their possible proximity to rulers. It would be rather surprising that such clichés had not been spread in ancient Persia too. In fact, the hypothesis is somewhat supported by considering the eunuch whom Ctesias called Combaphis.¹¹⁴ This figure has been connected with an Iranian legend of a certain Combabos, who would have made himself a eunuch and been honoured by the king for his trustworthiness.¹¹⁵ It has been suggested that Ctesias knew this Near Eastern tale, and, among other things, it led Briant to think that clichés about eunuchs in Greek literature might be based on edifying oral Near Eastern folk-tales.¹¹⁶ That is why it cannot be ruled out that Ctesias' account is sometimes based on local folk-tales or gossip, and not mainly on an 'orientalist' construction.

5. Near Eastern Sources and their Aporias

5.1 Persian Terminology and Iconography

Obviously, we would like to find some views on eunuchs in Near Eastern sources, but the evidence is disappointing. There is no term in official Persian texts, neither in royal inscriptions nor in administrative documents such as the Persepolis tablets, that could be identified as signifying 'eunuch' or corresponding to the Greek term *εὐνοῦχος*.¹¹⁷

Archaeology has been appealed to, especially iconographic material, and there has been for a long time a debate on the beardless attendants in the palace reliefs (the Achaemenid ones of Persepolis, as well as the Neo-Assyrian ones of Khorsabad): are the beardless men eunuchs or not? Some scholars consider that they represent eunuchs,¹¹⁸ and that this attests to the presence of eunuchs in powerful positions,¹¹⁹ while for others some of these

¹¹⁴ F 13 §10.

¹¹⁵ Benveniste (1939); Posener (1986). Cf. Lenfant (2004) LXX and n. 258.

¹¹⁶ Briant (1996) 282–3 = (2002) 271–2.

¹¹⁷ Cf. Briant (1996) 287 = (2002) 276.

¹¹⁸ Olmstead (1958) 218 obviously considers the identification 'beardless/eunuch' as self-evident, since he says about the cupbearer who stands behind Xerxes that 'his unbearded face is sufficiently exposed to indicate that he is a eunuch'. See also recently Llewellyn Jones (2002) 24 and, concerning beardless officials pictured on Neo-Assyrian seals, Watanabe (1999) 319–20.

¹¹⁹ E.g. Grayson (1995) 89.

could be non-castrated young men, that is king's pages.¹²⁰ The debate is far from being closed,¹²¹ and this does not help in solving the issue.

5.2 Cuneiform Sources

ša rēši: Eunuch or not Eunuch?

A similar aporia results from the debate on cuneiform sources, which could have helped shed some light on the question. In fact, the Akkadian term *ša rēši* (plural *šūt rēšī*) has raised many discussions—as did the corresponding terms in other Near Eastern languages, such as the Biblical Hebrew term *saris*—so that there are still today two main positions among Assyriologists: for some scholars, the word always designates castrated men,¹²² while for others it would not always designate castrates.¹²³ This debate is no more closed than that on the beardless men.

ša rēši and εὐνοῦχοι: an Unfruitful Comparison?

Could at least the terms of the debate on *ša rēši* shed some light on that on εὐνοῦχοι in Greek sources? At first sight, they should, all the more since in one case the same person has been described both as *ša rēši* in a Babylonian document (the Babylonian Dynastic Prophecy) and as εὐνοῦχος in Greek literature: it is the one who killed the Persian king Arses [Artaxerxes IV], the famous Bagoas of classical sources.¹²⁴ Yet while Grayson considers the coin-

¹²⁰ Oppenheim (1973) esp. 333–4; Pirngruber (2011) 288. Siddal (2007) 233–4 also points out that some beardless figures have been re-identified as women or priests. Oppenheim's paper questions the interpretation of both beardless attendants and *ša rēši* (see below) as always referring to eunuchs. According to him, the dilemma 'eunuch or not eunuch' would at least go back to 1899.

¹²¹ The recent paper of Pirngruber does not close the debate. To the hypothesis of young pages on Assyrian reliefs, Grayson (1995) 93 objected that the beardless figures looked like mature adults, not boys. True, Oppenheim (1973) 334 had tried to forestall that objection by suggesting that there would be in fact three categories of beardless figures: eunuchs, young men, and clean-shaven grown men who would have been previously young men supposed to keep their youthful appearance by shaving their beard when growing older. But one is not compelled to subscribe to such an acrobatic suggestion.

¹²² E.g., Grayson (1995); Deller (1999), who follows on from Grayson and takes the fact as granted; Watanabe (1999), esp. 317–9. Pirngruber (2011) defines this position as the mainstream.

¹²³ Oppenheim (1973); Siddal (2007); Pirngruber (2011). Jursa (2011) does not discuss this point.

¹²⁴ Grayson (1995) 89 n. 22. Babylonian text: Grayson (1975) 34–5, iii, 2–8; van der Spek (2003), text 5 (The Dynastic Prophecy), col. V, l. 5 (pp. 314 and 316: 'That king a

cidence of both terms for the same person as an illustration that both terms mean eunuch, others argue that both designate in this case a dignitary who was not castrated.¹²⁵

But I wonder whether there is not a flaw in such a comparison: most of the occurrences of *ša rēši* are earlier than the Persian period, whereas for *εὐνοῦχος* it is the reverse. Now the meaning of a term can change, and precisely this has been assumed in the case of *ša rēši*, although in differing directions: some scholars have argued that the change was from ‘eunuch’ to ‘(non-castrated) high dignitary’, others have argued that it was the other way around, and still others that it always meant ‘eunuchs’.¹²⁶ Now, if *ša rēši* did have two meanings (either successively or at the same time), are we allowed to infer that it was also the case for *εὐνοῦχος*? It does not seem to be self-evident.¹²⁷

6. ‘Eunuchs Not Being Eunuchs’ (D. M. Lewis)

6.1 Two Sorts of Eunuchs?

Nevertheless, the possibility that the same term could sometimes refer to eunuchs, and sometimes to non-castrated high dignitaries, although a debated hypothesis in Assyrian studies, has been introduced in the interpretation of Greek *εὐνοῦχοι* supposed to live in the Persian Empire. Curiously, scholars, even the most sceptical about Ctesias’ credibility, have discussed the nature of the referents who had inspired the characters that he described as *εὐνοῦχοι*.

The first seems to have been Friedrich König in his commentary on Ctesias’ *Persica* published in 1972: there he doubted that characters described as *εὐνοῦχοι* could be castrated men and suggested that Greeks wanted to

eunuch (*ša-re-[-ši]* [will murder]); Kuhrt (2007) 425, §10, no. 4(i). Greek sources: see especially Diod. 17.5.3–4 and Strabo 15.3.24.

¹²⁵ Briant (1996) 288, 794 = (2002) 277, 774.

¹²⁶ From ‘eunuch’ to ‘(non-castrated) high dignitary’: Pirngruber (2011) 293–7 (on middle-Assyrian palace-edicts). From ‘(non-castrated) high dignitary’ to ‘eunuch’: Dalley (2002) quoted by Pirngruber (and obviously isolated). Constant meaning of ‘eunuch’: Grayson (1995), which represents the prevailing view.

¹²⁷ That is still, it seems, the presupposition that underlies Pirngruber’s approach. Jursa (2011) is more cautious since he analyses *ša rēši* in Neo-Babylonian sources as meaning ‘courtesan’ (a title rather than a precise function) without concluding anything on Greek *εὐνοῦχοι* nor on their relationship to castration.

translate an unknown Persian term.¹²⁸ Five years later, in his authoritative book on *Sparta and Persia*, David Lewis made the following comment about König's book: 'Fantastic interpretations involving eunuchs not being eunuchs'.¹²⁹ The major trend today is, however, that which was in part suggested by König, and has been refined by Pierre Briant: according to the latter, it is tempting to assume that there were at the Persian court two sorts of 'eunuchs' (he obviously means *εὐνοῦχοι*): on the one hand, castrated men, who were slaves and attendants; on the other hand, high dignitaries, who were Iranian nobles and had the court title of eunuchs.¹³⁰

It is certainly a tempting hypothesis, but it remains a hypothesis, which is, in fact, given as such by Briant himself. Yet it has become dogma in recent scholarship, and many scholars who refer to Briant have neglected his rather cautious wording.¹³¹

6.2 A Mere Hypothesis and its Questionable Premises

This hypothesis is yet worth analysing. The reason for it is that, as seen above, some *εὐνοῦχοι* are also ascribed high court titles and functions by Greek writers other than Ctesias.¹³² The argument is yet based on certain

¹²⁸ König (1972) 54, without any conclusive argument, but confused reasoning based on variants of manuscripts, which do not prove anything. To their identity as eunuchs, he objects that Ctesias' *εὐνοῦχοι* have children, are often married, and hold the most important posts (72), and he assumes that Artoxares could not be a castrated man, because in that case his ambition would be unlikely and because he was married (88). Now in addition to the fact that married eunuchs may exist (below, n. 149), there is no instance in Ctesias' fragments of a eunuch with a biological child nor of a married eunuch (see Appendix on Artoxares' alleged wife); and that a eunuch could not hold an important post is, in addition, a questionable postulate. See below.

¹²⁹ Lewis (1977) 82 n. 203. The scholar had not hesitated to write earlier in his book (15 n. 71): 'It may be desirable to say that König, *Die Persika des Ktesias von Knidos* (1972) should not be used at all; I shall cite him occasionally for amusement only.'

¹³⁰ Briant (1996) 287 = (2002) 276: 'It is rather tempting to think that there were two kinds of eunuch at the Persian court: (1) the castrated men, reduced to palace slavery and used in specific contexts (at a higher or lesser rank in the domestic hierarchy); and (2) the eunuchs in the sense of court hierarchy, that is, nobles (Persian or Iranian) in the king's immediate circle ...'

¹³¹ The cautious introductory words ('It is rather tempting to think ...') have then been forgotten by those who refer to this phrase (e. g. Huber (2009) 200; Pirngruber (2011) 279), and, in a sense, also by Briant himself in his further developments.

¹³² Mithridates as *κατακοιμιστής* (chamberlain) at Xerxes' court (Diod. 11.69.1), Sati-barzanes *κατακοιμιστής* under Artaxerxes II (Plut. *Art.* 12.4; *Apophth.* 173e), and above all Bagoas as chiliarch under Artaxerxes III (Diod. 17.5.3).

premises: first, that a castrated man could not be a high dignitary or even exercise great influence;¹³³ second, that an Iranian could not be castrated.

Now such incompatibilities are far from being self-evident. (1) Let us repeat that the available non-Greek evidence on the Persian Empire does not give any clue on such matters. (2) But if we turn to other societies with court eunuchs, like Byzantium and imperial China, it can be stated that it *was* possible to be *both* a castrated man *and* a dignitary or, more generally, someone influential at court.¹³⁴ There were even native families who did not hesitate to castrate one of their sons so that he could enter the career of a high official.¹³⁵ I do not suggest that this was the case in Persia (in fact, we don't know),¹³⁶ only that it is not impossible to be both a castrated man and someone influential. (3) It furthermore cannot be proved that an Iranian could not be castrated. Briant himself has noted that nearly all named eunuchs had Iranian names,¹³⁷ but that these could be eunuch names given to them when arriving at the king's service,¹³⁸ a practice attested in Assyria.¹³⁹

¹³³ Briant (1996) 286 = (2002) 274: 'It seems doubtful that eunuchs in the functional sense (castrated men of humble status) could have obtained positions as high as the eunuchs mentioned by Ctesias'.

¹³⁴ On eunuchs in Byzantium: see the references above n. 54, esp. Sidéris (2010), 82–5 (a summary of the functions assumed by court eunuchs); in China: Jay (1993); Tsai (1996); Tsai (2002); see also the biographies of two Chinese eunuchs from the beginning of the twentieth century: Yu Chunhe (Dan Shi (1995)) and Sun Yaoting (Yinghua (2008)). See also the case of eunuchs at the late Roman court (Hopkins 1963) and at the Sassanian court (Huber (2009) 207).

¹³⁵ Grayson (1995) 88 and 95 cites these examples of Byzantium and China and suggests that it might also have been the same in Assyria. See also Deller (1999) 306.

¹³⁶ The attested reasons for becoming a eunuch in the Persian Empire are: (1) as an individual or collective punishment; (2) as part of a tribute from a subject people; (3) as part of the spoils of war; (4) as one to be sold as a slave to a eunuch-maker: see Briant (1996) 284 = (2002) 273. The words with which, according to Curtius, the Persian Orsines would have explained his contempt for Bagoas (the king's lover) suggest a voluntary transformation (10.1.26; see below). But this could refer in fact to the erotic function of that eunuch, not to his castration itself, and it would then be just an apparent exception.

¹³⁷ A linguistic study of each Iranian name found in Ctesias' fragments is provided by Schmitt (2006).

¹³⁸ Briant (1996) 286 = (2002) 274: 'nearly all of the eunuchs mentioned by name have Iranian names. For this there are two possible explanations: either they really were eunuchs who were given Iranian names when they arrived at court, or else they were Iranian nobles integrated into the court hierarchy by being given the label "eunuch".'

¹³⁹ On the new names given to the eunuchs who entered the Assyrian court service, see Deller (1999) 306.

(4) All this seems to presuppose that Persians had only contempt for eunuchs, but on this matter we have no firm evidence.¹⁴⁰ First, classical sources are inconclusive when they express general assertions. For instance, when Xenophon claims that eunuchs are despised (*ἄδοξοι*, *Cyr.* 7.5.61), he testifies at the very most, as noted by Pirngruber, to the feeling of most Greeks,¹⁴¹ and when he conversely sets the eunuch up as the very model of faithfulness, this is in the service of proving Greek political theory.¹⁴² The same argument can be held about Curtius, who states in one place that Persians did not despise eunuchs¹⁴³ and in another has a Persian noble say that ‘Persians are not used to considering as males those who have been turned to women by their turpitude’.¹⁴⁴ In this case, contempt seems to be connected with the erotic function of the eunuch in question, that is, Bagoas, Alexander’s lover, not to be confused with his already mentioned namesake. Such instances clearly show how general assertions can be held to serve a purpose in their context, and how they can contradict each other within the same work—that is, how inconclusive as evidence they are.

Moreover, classical sources also display counter-examples, such as Hermotimos (explicitly a castrated man), who was highly honoured by king Xerxes, according to Herodotus, and was also powerful enough to execute his personal revenge on Panionios, the man who had made him a eunuch.¹⁴⁵ Then we have seen that the tale of Combabos suggested an Iranian background for the positive image of the most trustworthy eunuch. Last, other civilisations with court eunuchs attest both negative prejudices and fearful respect toward them. In other words, the alleged unlikelihood of castrated dignitaries might be cast in doubt.

¹⁴⁰ In fact, one can wonder if it is not a possible inconsistency of the discussed hypothesis, since if Persians had really called high dignitaries and eunuchs by the same name, either at the same time or successively, it would suggest that it was not such a disparaging term.

¹⁴¹ Pirngruber (2011) 300.

¹⁴² Azoulay (2000).

¹⁴³ Curt. 3.3.23: *spadonumque grex haud sane illis gentibus uilis* ‘and a herd of eunuchs, who are not at all despised by those peoples’ (trans. J. C. Rolfe).

¹⁴⁴ Curt. 10.1.26: *nec moris esse Persis mares ducere, qui stupro effeminarentur*.

¹⁴⁵ Hdt. 8.105 (Hornblower’s thesis (2003) that Hermotimos’ story would be no more than novelistic fantasy is unconvincing). See also Artoxares, who, like Hermotimos, is explicitly a castrated man.

6.3 The Two ‘Sorts of Eunuchs’ and Ctesias’ Fragments

As for Ctesias, the distinction suggested by Briant could hardly be applied to his eunuchs. (1) It must be noted that the word *εὐνοῦχος* is absolutely unequivocal for a Greek. I know of no instance where it could be stated that the word could designate in Greek eyes a non-castrated man. By using this word, Ctesias meant castrated men and his readers understood castrated men.¹⁴⁶ (2) All features of Ctesias’ *εὐνοῦχοι* are compatible with their being eunuchs: none of them has a biological child;¹⁴⁷ none appears to be married¹⁴⁸ (and even if this were the case, it would not be unparalleled in other civilisations);¹⁴⁹ and as already seen, one of them has a beard made for him so that he looks like a man—which implies that he has no beard and does not look like a man.¹⁵⁰ (3) Assuming that behind Ctesias’ *εὐνοῦχοι* there would be ‘real’ referents¹⁵¹ who would be sometimes castrated sometimes not, how could *we* make the difference?

We have seen that some scholars seem to take the functions exercised by the individual as a criterion. But the summary of Ctesias by Photius does not make that function clear for us. For instance, the murders of several kings take place in their bedrooms.¹⁵² Now when a eunuch is involved and helps the murderer(s) to enter the bedroom, we do not know whether he is a sim-

¹⁴⁶ That is what Lewis meant when ironically speaking of ‘eunuchs not being eunuchs’. There is nothing to support Pirngruber’s claim ((2011) 309) that the word *εὐνοῦχος* would be equivocal.

¹⁴⁷ As seen above, König (1972) 54 makes a mistake about it, and understandably he does not provide any example. In the fragments, there is just the single case of a eunuch who adopts a man.

¹⁴⁸ See above and the Appendix below.

¹⁴⁹ For instance, eunuchs could marry in China (Jay (1993), esp. 467–8; Tougher (2008) 46, who provides other examples, but explains that it was not possible in Byzantium). A married eunuch, although admittedly rare, is not, then, such a ridiculous idea as Pirngruber seems to consider when analysing Ctesias’ account of Artoxares ((2011) 283; see Appendix).

¹⁵⁰ Briant (1996) 285 = (2002) 274 thinks that this refers to the hairpieces worn by the king and the court nobles, although in that case Ctesias–Photius should say ‘so that he looks like a noble’.

¹⁵¹ That is curiously assumed by Rollinger (2007), although claiming that ‘the omnipresent eunuchs’ provide ‘a picture due to ideological preconceptions’: ‘We may even doubt that the so called eunuchs—one of the standardized ingredients of an oriental court—have *really* been castrates’ (my italics).

¹⁵² The Magus is found in bed thanks to the complicity of a eunuch who held all the keys of the palace (F 13 §16). The assassination of Xerxes follows the same pattern (§33; cf. Diod. 11.69.2). And according to a later source, Artaxerxes II failed to be murdered by his son Darios, thanks to the denunciation by a eunuch (Plut. *Art.* 29.1).

ple attendant or a chamberlain. Having said that, even if we had more than fragments, it would probably be impossible to classify many of Ctesias' *εὐνοῦχοι* according to one of the proposed categories. Let us take the example of Artoxares: on the one hand, although his name is Iranian,¹⁵³ he is described as a Paphlagonian¹⁵⁴ and castrated—and should then be classified in Briant's first category; on the other hand, he is a close advisor to King Artaxerxes I, he plays a role in negotiations (F 14 §42), he is nonetheless banished to Armenia (§43), but he comes back a few years later as one of those who crown Darius II (F 15 §50); he becomes a close advisor to the king (§51), but conceives a plot to take over power (§54), being a sort of precursor of Bagoas—he is certainly not a simple attendant and then should *not* be classified in the first category.¹⁵⁵

Let us add that influence is something which is not necessarily linked to an institutional function. Certainly there was a hierarchy among real eunuchs of the Persian court and most served as servants, just caring for the material needs and desires of the king and his family.¹⁵⁶ And the most relevant distinction among eunuchs at the Persian court could be the one established by Amélie Kuhrt, a distinction which is not an absolute one in some cases: she notes that 'some of the eunuchs holding very high positions appear to be members of prominent families' and that 'a distinction needs to be drawn between eunuchs in leading positions and the hordes of run-of-the-mill domestic staff, who performed the myriad tasks of the royal house-

¹⁵³ Schmitt (2006) 141–3.

¹⁵⁴ F 14 §42. Schmitt (2006) 143 suggested correcting *Παφλαγών* ('Paphlagonian') to *παφλάζων* ('blustering'), but this emendation does not seem convincing, as it does not fit in the context: Artoxares helps in negotiations to reconcile Megabyzus with the king, so that he seems far from being 'blustering'. Moreover, the verb *παφλάζειν*, which never occurs in Photius, is hardly used outside poetic and medical texts. If 'Paphlagonian' refers, as expected, to Artoxares' ethnic origin, Artoxares could be either a loan name that he received at birth or a eunuch name (see above).

¹⁵⁵ It could be said incidentally that, apart from Ctesias, Babylonian tablets also seem to speak against a classification of Artoxares in the first category (attendants): Artoxares is likely to correspond to the Artahsaru whom Babylonian tablets mention in the late 420s as owning estates (see e.g. Lewis (1977) 21, 75–6; Cook (1983) 136; Schmitt (2006) 141–2).

Hermotimos is no easier to classify, since he is indisputably castrated, but not a simple servant: according to Herodotus (8.104–5), he had 'won a place second to none among the eunuchs serving the King' and had 'become the most honoured of all the eunuchs in the court of Xerxes.'

¹⁵⁶ Kuhrt (2007) 591, §12 no. 21, n. 1 rightly notes that many of these duties are mentioned only in passing. In Ctesias' fragments, they appear in Plutarch's and Nicolaus' citations (which offer detailed accounts) more often than in Photius' summary (which probably only mentions alleged influential 'upper' eunuchs).

hold.’ She adds that to go from the low category to the leading one does not seem impossible, as Hermotimos’ example suggests: initially a Greek slave, castrated by a Greek trader, sold in Sardis to Persians and then arriving at the court as a gift to the king, he became the most honoured of Xerxes’ eunuchs and was assigned to take care of his bastard children. But she also stresses that such a case might be rare.¹⁵⁷

7. Eunuchs of Persia as a Greek Experience

For classical Greeks, as seen above, eunuchs were certainly literary clichés and a component of ethnic prejudice against the Persian Empire and its political system. Yet real life is also worth considering: for Greeks, eunuchs were not just literature—especially for the Greeks of Asia. True, some Anatolian local governors or rulers had eunuchs around them: one thinks of Cyrus the Younger,¹⁵⁸ Artemisia of Halicarnassus,¹⁵⁹ or Eubulus of Assos.¹⁶⁰ And Greeks of Asia could themselves become eunuchs, whether as a result of Persian repression against a rebellious city¹⁶¹ or as slaves that a trader castrated in order to increase their market value.¹⁶²

¹⁵⁷ ‘Some of the individuals reaching the court by such routes might, if lucky, rise to occupy relatively privileged positions, such as the care of royal children; most did not’ (577). That is the best summary. See also the translated documents (588–91) and the initial distinction, in Greek writings, between a negative stereotype (the treacherous eunuch) and a positive stereotype (the devoted servant).

¹⁵⁸ Cf. Xen. *Anab.* 1.9.28–9 (with Azoulay (2000) 9–12, who convincingly argues that in the *Anabasis* Artapates, ‘the most faithful of Cyrus’s sceptre-bearers (σκηπτουῶχοι)’, is meant to be a eunuch like the other sceptre-bearers in the *Cyropaedia*): Ael. *VH* 6.25; Plut. *Art.* 11.7, 12.1.

¹⁵⁹ Polyæn. *Strat.* 8.53.4.

¹⁶⁰ Eubulus had Hermias as eunuch slave in Assus. Later, Hermias was associated with Eubulus who was tyrant of Atarneus and Assus (Strabo 13.610) and succeeded to his previous master after his death, maybe after having killed him. Cf. Guyot (1980) 207–9. The cases of Artemisia and Eubulos show that eunuchs also used to be employed by Greek dynasts. To these could be added, although not rulers’ attendants, the eunuch νεωκόρος of Ephesus called Megabyzus, another occasion for Greeks to see eunuchs in Asia Minor. For the case of Xenophon, see below with n. 166.

¹⁶¹ It was the case when the Ionian revolt was suppressed in the early 5th c. BC (Hdt. 6.9.4; 6.32) and perhaps Chalcedonians had to suffer the same in the late 5th c. BC by order of Pharnabazus (Arrian, *FGrHist* 156 FF 79–80). Cf. Bosworth (1997), who dates the incident to early 409.

¹⁶² It was, as seen above, the case of Hermotimos, who was the victim of Panionios of Chios. The latter’s trade was to buy slaves and change them into eunuchs in order to sell

Consequently, the main Greek authors on Persia had certainly met eunuchs or heard Greek people who had known some of them: Hermotimos was from Pedasa, not far from Halicarnassus,¹⁶³ and his colourful story, supposed to occur in the first decades of the fifth century when Herodotus was either a child or not yet born, could have reached him through local tradition in his own native city. And the same may be assumed about the eunuch of Sataspes who would have fled to Samos after the execution of his master under Xerxes. He is one of the rare eunuchs alluded to by Herodotus (4.43.7), and the historian notes that he came to Samos ‘with a great hoard of wealth, of which a man of Samos got possession. I know the man’s name but deliberately omit it.’ Samian sources are clearly suggested and seem all the more likely since Herodotus is supposed to have lived in Samos for some time.¹⁶⁴

Incidentally, familiarity with eunuchs was obviously not the same for the Greeks of Europe. It is not by chance that we find in Athens some of the most caricatured and disparaging views on eunuchs.¹⁶⁵ Xenophon is an exception which is easy to understand, since he was one of the few Greek authors from Europe who stayed for some time in the Persian Empire, where he did at least see eunuchs around Cyrus the Younger.¹⁶⁶ It has been noted, however, that, all in all, allusions to eunuchs in Athenian literature itself are rather scarce.¹⁶⁷

For Ctesias himself, eunuchs were even more real. As a man who lived at the Persian court for several years, he must have come close to court eunuchs. As a physician and even as a mere witness, he could certainly make a distinction between eunuchs and others. Physicians and eunuchs were among the king’s and the queen’s attendants, whatever function was

them in Ephesus and Sardis to non-Greek customers. If we believe Herodotus, Hermotimos was only one of many victims of Panionios (8.105).

¹⁶³ Hdt. 8.104–5.

¹⁶⁴ We cannot say whether that eunuch was a Greek and originally from Samos.

¹⁶⁵ See the Phrygian in Euripides’ *Orestes*, the eunuchs of Aristophanes’ *Acharnians* or Plato’s *Laws* (695a). It seems that none of these authors directly knew the Persian Empire. On eunuchs in tragedy and Aristophanes, see Hall (1989) 157–8 and Hutzfeldt (1999).

¹⁶⁶ Azoulay (2004) 369 n. 220 also points out that Xenophon personally knew another eunuch, Megabyzus, νεωκόρος of Artemis in Ephesus.

¹⁶⁷ Tuplin (1996) 169. Hall (1989) 157 is at least exaggerating when she says that ‘eunuchs appalled and fascinated the phallogocentric Hellenes’. After all, we only know of three eunuchs in tragedy: in Phrynichus’ *Phoenissae*, Sophocles’ *Troilus* and Euripides’ *Orestes*. Since only the latter play is preserved, there is only one eunuch in the 33 preserved tragedies.

exercised by eunuchs (humble attendants, cupbearers or someone more important).¹⁶⁸ And among eunuchs might be Greeks who must have become bilingual. Now we have seen that Ctesias' eunuchs seemed to know many secrets of the king and sometimes revealed some of them.¹⁶⁹ In the same way, according to witnesses of the twentieth century, eunuchs of the Forbidden City knew all the peculiarities of their masters and devoted most of their conversations to gossip about them, since there was nothing exciting to say about their own monotonous lives.¹⁷⁰ Now local gossip has often been put forward as a main source for Ctesias' *Persica*. That gossip from eunuchs about the past could be one of the sources of Ctesias' views and account of Persia¹⁷¹ is not less likely than mere competition with Herodotus or consultation of royal parchments.¹⁷²

As for the time of Ctesias' stay at the Persian court, as seen above, the role of eunuchs at the court is in his story only subordinate and far more discrete than in his previous account. Ctesias himself seems to ascribe the change to the dominating personality of Parysatis, successively wife and mother of the king: her influence would have replaced that of eunuchs.¹⁷³ The attempt of Artoxares, if historical, could also have alerted the court.¹⁷⁴ That difference between past and contemporary time could also suggest that Ctesias did not try to write sensationalistically about eunuchs when he wrote as an eyewitness.

¹⁶⁸ In Hdt. 3.130.4, the physician Democedes is escorted to Darius' wives by eunuchs. In Diod. 17.5.3, Ochos is poisoned by his physician by order of the eunuch Bagoas.

¹⁶⁹ In Ctesias' own time, Satibarzanes is said to have 'slandered Orondes, alleging that he was sleeping with Parysatis' (F 16 §60), but Ctesias says that 'Parysatis was extremely chaste'. (There are three mentions of a Satibarzanes in Ctesias' fragments and for the same period of the reign of Artaxerxes II, which suggests that they all refer to the same figure: Satibarzanes is also said to have received from Evagoras gifts for the king (F 30 §73) and at Cunaxa, when the king is close to dying from thirst, he runs around looking for something to drink (F 20 §12.4: Satibarzanes is only called 'eunuch' in the last passage, which is in Plutarch, but this §12 goes back to Ctesias (Lenfant (2004) n. 688)).

¹⁷⁰ Dan Shi (1995) 143–4. The biography of Sun Yaoting (Yinghua (2008)) also provides examples, e.g. at 100–3, 134–8, and 173–82.

¹⁷¹ Already suggested by Drews (1973) 107 and Lenfant (2004) LXVIII, CXX.

¹⁷² For Ctesias' reference to the royal parchments, see T 3; Lenfant (2004) XXXVI–XXXIX. Stronk (2010) 16–25 takes the reference seriously because of similar references in *Ezra* and *Esther*, the independence of which has however been questioned (see e.g. Macchi (2007)). Be that as it may, he too concurs with the use of oral sources: Llewellyn-Jones and Robson (2010) 58–61.

¹⁷³ F 15 §51. Lenfant (2004) CXVI.

¹⁷⁴ Lenfant (2004) CXVI.

Some Concluding Remarks

Assessing the historical background of Ctesias' eunuchs is a difficult issue. Now we should perhaps first make clear what we mean with 'Ctesias' eunuchs'. If we think of them as literary characters, I would reply without hesitating that they *were* castrated men, in the author's eyes as well as in his readers' view. I have argued that this did not necessarily imply contempt for them on the part of Ctesias himself, whereas it might have been the case for many of his readers. The Greeks' picture of the Persian court could not remain neutral; it had to underline some stark contrasts between both cultures, and eunuchs could be one of them. But if beyond the literary characters we think about the historical figures who could have inspired their story, Ctesias' eunuchs are an ideal illustration of the many difficulties that modern historians have to face when they try to study Persian realities through Greek literature.¹⁷⁵

The first one is to cross-check Greek assertions with Near Eastern evidence: we have seen that the cuneiform sources and palace reliefs which possibly related to eunuchs did not in some cases refer to the same period and above all that they raised many discussions of whether they really referred to castrated men or not, so that this has remained a matter of debate. We should add that even if this Near Eastern evidence undeniably showed castrated men of the same period, it could not, because of its very nature and purpose, betray any trace of possible plots or influence of subaltern people, which rather belong to the so-called 'petite histoire'. As the story of Combabos shows, figures of eunuchs may also sometimes originate from Near Eastern tales, which, however, generally escape our knowledge. This means that in this case as in many others we lack any sure primary evidence and have to turn to Greek literature.

The second difficulty is to analyse individual Greek representations as such. One has certainly to assess the possibility of cultural misunderstanding on the part of Greeks, as well as the part played by possible ethnic prejudices and (negatively or even positively) connoted pictures of the Persian Empire. One must certainly take into account that Greeks were especially attentive to differences, but also that there were various viewpoints among the Greeks themselves, especially among Greek authors who, in addition to having their own background, each had a specific purpose. One logically cannot exclude *a priori* that a Greek could also be sometimes well-informed and not especially malicious. It is in fact well known that the relationship between Greeks and Persians was far from being confined to mere hostility. We have seen the specificity of Ctesias' eunuchs compared to those of He-

¹⁷⁵ Kuhrt (2007) 6–10; Lenfant (2011) 5–20.

Herodotus' account, his many references to them as attendants to members of the royal family, even king's advisors, and their role as involved in, or denouncing, some court plots. Such roles, however, are ascribed as well to eunuchs in Greek accounts of a later period of Persian history, and the figure of the powerful Bagoas has much in common with Ctesias' Artoxares, who was also a kingmaker and also tried to kill the king. Such a picture of eunuchs in Persia is, then, not limited to Ctesias' account. As for Ctesias' intentions and his feeling towards eunuchs, they are all the more difficult to assess as we know his work only through fragments.

A third requirement has been therefore to examine the authors who give us an (indirect and biased) access to Ctesias' account itself, not only by considering in general terms how they used it, but also by taking into account their personal relationship to eunuchs, either real or not, as that could be observed either in their work or in their life. This examination, which was of authors of the Hellenistic, Roman and Byzantine periods, could show first that eunuchs were not an important component of their picture of Persia, and then that there was no reason to suspect them of inventing Ctesias' eunuchs, but that some of them were more inclined to underline their influence, especially Photius, precisely our richest source on the matter.

A last difficulty is to analyse and assess the foundations of current prevailing positions, and two things are at issue here. First, we have seen that a hypothesis on two sorts of categories designated by the Greek word for eunuchs has become the *doxa*, but also that this hypothesis is based on questionable premises and cannot be applied in practice to Ctesias' eunuchs. The success of this hypothesis has at least two basic reasons which have a direct link to our poverty as historians of the Persian Empire. The first is that we lack evidence on events after Herodotus, so that we hesitate to reject totally Ctesias' account despite its obvious weakness and its fragmentary transmission, even if this sometimes leads to an inconsistent use of it. The second is that we are often reduced to basing a statement on likelihood. Of course, this criterion is frequently used by historians on many issues and I do not intend to contest its use and its usefulness in general. But in this specific case, thanks to comparisons with court eunuchs from other civilisations, the alleged unlikelihood of several points can be contested, e.g., that a castrated man could not be married, that he could not be a dignitary, or that a negative stereotype of eunuchs must be ascribed to a foreign viewpoint.

The second issue is the interpretation of eunuchs as figures of an 'orientalist' Greek view of Persia. This raises, in my opinion, two sorts of problems. The first is the soundness of the analogy which is suggested by this label: it implies that eunuchs of Achaemenid Persia were in Greek eyes what eunuchs of Persia were for Montesquieu's readers, which is partly true, but for the most part mistaken: e.g., Ctesias' eunuchs are not 'keepers of a

harem', and there are, conversely, neither plotters nor influential figures among the eunuchs of the *Persian Letters*; these have in fact a specific meaning in Montesquieu's picture of despotism, whereas there is nothing to suggest that Ctesias' account was intended or even perceived as a representation and indictment of despotism. In my view, the differences are far larger than the similarities and I am therefore reluctant to use such a label which introduces the prejudices of another time and makes us run the risk of anachronistic or confused interpretations.¹⁷⁶

But beyond the soundness of the analogy, the interpretation of Ctesias' eunuchs or more generally of Greek representations of Persia as 'orientalist' raises the problem of the word and its use by scholars. 'Orientalism' is a polemical word, used for denunciation, and this is in itself a questionable attitude for an historian.¹⁷⁷

I hope to have shown that it is not as absurd or impossible as is usually held that *if* Ctesias' eunuchs in some way reflect historical figures, these could have been castrates, have exercised influence on members of the royal family, or taken part in plots. Such a possibility can, of course, be contested, but not by simply postulating that this is a ridiculous, uncritical or orientalist view, nor by basing oneself on disputable premises. Finally, one may certainly find it disappointing and uncomfortable to lack a clear and certain result, but bringing to light the foundations of a prevailing view and its possible fragility may also be considered progress.

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¹⁷⁶ A good example of such a confusing approach is given by Briant (2011) 513, who strangely equates Ctesias' view of the Ancient Near East with that of European travelers like Flaubert 'd'un Orient-femelle offert à leur sexualité' and quotes (following Edward Said) the French novelist's remark that 'The oriental woman is no more than a machine'. It is needless to say that there is nothing like this in Ctesias' fragments. Briant even wishes for a book on Greco-Persian orientalism considered as a predecessor of modern orientalism as analysed by Said—in other words, a book whose conclusion comes before the premises. Harrison (2011) 122 instead rightly questions 'the assumption of continuity in ancient attitudes to the "Orient" from the ancient world to the present day'.

¹⁷⁷ Marc Bloch famously invited the historian to understand rather than to judge. As for Achaemenid history, Harrison (2011) 67–9 rightly stresses how a 'reductive moralising perspective' has been in some ways reintroduced in the last decades (see also Lenfant (2011) 14) and emphasises that 'it is a part of the historian's role to stand back and assess a given society in as dispassionate terms as possible'.

Appendix: Artoxares' Alleged Wife

In a recent paper, Pirngruber (2011) 283 doubts that Ctesias' Artoxares could be a castrate, simply because he has a wife. But this is based on a misunderstanding of the following Greek text of Photius (Ctesias F 15 §54 (Photius 72, 43a)):

Ἄρτοξάρης ὁ εὐνοῦχος, ὃς μέγα ἠδύνατο παρὰ βασιλεῖ, ἐπιβουλεύει βασιλέα θέλων αὐτὸς βασιλεῦσαι. πύγωνα γὰρ καὶ ὑπόρρινα προσέταξεν αὐτῷ γυναικὶ κατασκευάσαι, ἵνα ὡς ἀνὴρ φαίνοιτο.

Artoxares the eunuch, who was very influential with the King, plots against the King because he wishes himself to be king. He ordered a woman (γυναικί) to supply (κατασκευάσαι) him (αὐτῷ) with a moustache and a beard so that he looked like a man.

Αὐτῷ is a pronoun which completes κατασκευάσαι. In manuscripts, there is the non-reflexive form αὐτῷ, which modern editors have changed to the reflexive form αὐτῷ because it refers to the same person as the subject of the main verb προσέταξεν. In fact, medieval copyists often neglect to put a rough breathing where modern grammarians wish to have it.

In any case, it does not imply that the woman is Artoxares' wife: γυναικί alone normally means 'a woman' (see e.g. Phot. 170, 117b30; 242, 347b7; 279, 534b22), and for 'his wife' one would rather expect τῇ γυναικί (see e.g. Phot. 72, 42b6, 43a36; 79, 56a8; 96, 81a19; 166, 111b25 and 27; 238, 318a2 and 21; 242, 339a4; 242, 351a10; 242, 353a6). As for τῇ αὐτοῦ γυναικί, which Pirngruber gives as an alternative, it is in fact a correction which was proposed with a question mark by Felix Jacoby. It has against it that it is a double correction (addition of τῇ and change of αὐτῷ) and has only rare parallels in Photius (237, 308a41, τῇ γυναικί αὐτοῦ, corrected by Bekker from αὐτοῦ). That is why, unlike Pirngruber (and before him König (1972) 21; Lewis (1977) 82; Guyot (1980) 90 and 186; and Stronk (2010) 351–3), I would translate 'a woman'—as did Müller (*mulieri*, and not *uxori*), Henry, Lenfant (2004), Gera (2007) 82, and Llewellyn-Jones and Robson (2010).

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