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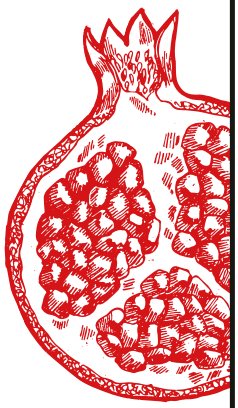

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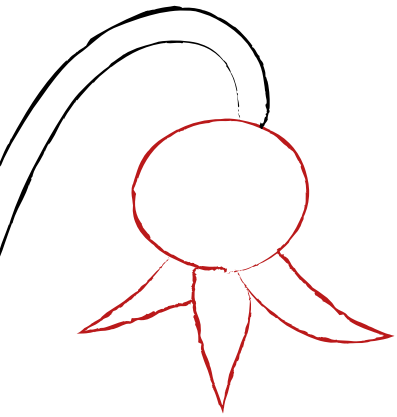

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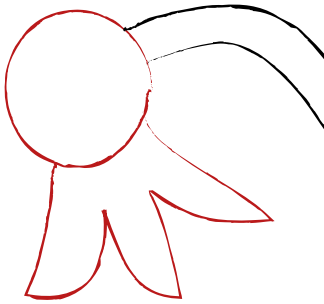

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NEHEMIAH'S TABLE, PERSIAN-STYLE FEASTING, AND LOCAL ELITES IN THE ACHAEMENID EMPIRE

Kacper Ziemba

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Abstract

Nehemiah 5:17–18 mentioning the governor's table has been interpreted as an instance of Persian-style feasting in the province of Yehud influenced by the sumptuous feasts organized by the Great Kings. This article discusses the two other occurrences of Persian dining, in Lydia and Egypt, comparing them with the biblical narrative and archaeological sources from the province of Yehud. It also applies Michael Dietler's theory of commensal politics to assess how the local elites in the Achaemenid Empire could have used Persian-style dining as a tool for social distinction. It concludes that Persian-style dining was a social phenomenon that could have functioned to bind the vast territories and diverse populations of the empire through a kind of patron–client relationship.

La mention de la table du gouverneur dans le texte de Néhémie 5:17–18 a été interprétée comme un exemple d'un banquet perse dans la province de Yehud, influencée par les somptueux banquets organisés par les Grands Rois. L'article examine les deux autres occurrences de banquet perse en Lydie et en Égypte, en les comparant au récit biblique et aux sources archéologiques de la province de Yehud. Il applique également la théorie de la politique commensale de Michael Dietler pour évaluer comment les élites locales de l'Empire achéménide pouvaient utiliser les banquets perses comme un outil de distinction sociale. L'étude conclut que le banquet perse était un phénomène social capable de lier les vastes territoires et les populations diverses de l'empire par des relations de patronage.

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NEHEMIAH'S TABLE, PERSIAN-STYLE FEASTING, AND LOCAL ELITES IN THE ACHAEMENID EMPIRE

Kacper Ziemba

The administration of the Achaemenid Persian Empire was an elite affair involving both ethnic Persians and other peoples living in the empire.[1] The highest levels of governance were principally the domain of Persian aristocratic families, with the Achaemenid dynasty on the royal throne. That group, defined by Pierre Briant as "ethno-classe dominante," engaged in relations with local elites, including royal dynasties, temple officials, and urban elites, who were instrumental in keeping Persian rule stable.[2] It was also the case in the province of Yehud, where the

[1] This article was written in the context of the Divergent Views of Diaspora in Ancient Judaism project at the University of Copenhagen. The first version was presented at the 2023 EABS Annual Conference in Syracuse. Many thanks to Alexiana Fry for improving the English text.

[2] Briant 1988; Basello 2021. Note, however, that Briant has revised this idea over the years; see his remarks in Briant 2017, 4–5, and his specific studies in the same volume.

local Judean elite administered the territory partially corresponding to pre-587 Judah.

This article will focus on how Persian-style feasting across the empire involved the local elites. The custom of elite feasting in the Ancient Near East and its political and social consequences are well-studied phenomena.[3] Concerning the Achaemenid Empire, I will address four issues:

(A) The feasts of the Achaemenid kings
(B) Social theory regarding commensal politics
(C) The cases of Persian-style feasting in Lydia and Egypt
(D) The case of Persian-style feasting in Yehud

In this article, I will look at three cases of Persian-style dining that took place in the empire's heartland and the western satrapies. I will use Michael Dietler's (2010) theory of commensal politics as a way to assess how the practice of Persian-style dining influenced the local elites in the empire. Moreover, I will use the concept of patronage to explain the ramifications of feasting in the Persian province of Yehud. Patronage is a mechanism of political and social exchange, defined as asymmetric and reciprocal relations between a patron (the socially dominant party) and a client (the socially subservient party). It allows an individual with political and economic prestige and power to influence other individuals who are subject to them through ties of asymmetric reciprocity. This relationship is based on the mutual exchange of goods and services. Patrons provide non-material services such as protection and access to decision-making bodies or persons within the government. The primary non-material service that clients provide is loyalty. While the patrons may appear to give more in goods and services than they receive, they obtain a valuable intangible benefit from the relationship in the form of enhanced prestige, that allows him to exert political influence over his clients Moreover, the relationship binding patron and client is expected to last a long time and must be voluntary: it is not, in modern parlance, a "one-off" arrangement.[4]

[3] For some examples, see Milano 1994; Altmann and Fu 2014; de Martino et al. 2024.

[4] Westbrook 2005, 211; Pfoh 2022, 2.

Patronage can also function, and often does, through intermediaries, taking the form of intermediary patronage. The bond may be dyadic, but its practice allows for an expansion into a pyramidal network where a smaller patron is also a client of a greater patron, acting as a broker between two parties, often separated by geographic or personal distance such as differences in rank or office. Therefore, there are at least two unequal parties in this cultural dependency and exchange (Kettering 1988, 425–26).

In the brief passage of Neh 5:17–18 that concerns the province of Yehud, the governor of Yehud, and other Judeans, we read the following:[5]

> והיהודים והסגנים מאה וחמשים איש והבאים אלינו מן הגוים אשר סביבתינו
> על שלחני ואשר היה נעשה ליום אחד שור אחד צאן שש ברורות וצפרים נעשו
> לי ובין עשרת ימים בכל יין להרבה ועם זה לחם הפחה לא בקשתי כי כבדה
> העבדה על העם הזה

> Moreover, there were at my table one hundred fifty people, Judeans and officials, besides those who came to us from the nations around us. Now that which was prepared for one day was one ox and six choice sheep; also fowls were prepared for me, and every ten days skins of wine in abundance, yet with all this I did not demand the food allowance of the governor, because of the heavy burden of labor on the people.

[5] Scholars have widely accepted that the basis of the book of Nehemiah's first-person narrative (so-called "Nehemiah Memoir") is the report of the governor of Yehud written in the second half of the fifth century (see, e.g., Blenkinsopp 1988; Reinmuth 2002; Fitzpatrick-McKinley 2015). However, scholars have also pointed out that the first-person account is a composite text. Recently, Fried has divided the account into the report of Nehemiah, who was supposed to have been sent to Yehud to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, and the later added report of the fifth-century provincial governor Yehoʾezer, which includes Neh 5 (2021, 6–11). Earlier, Jacob L. Wright had identified seven layers in Neh 1–13, where Neh 5:16–18 falls into the third, which contains "supplements which illustrate the positive implications of the building project by way of the negative reactions of the enemy" (2004, 340). He argues that the preceding verses in Neh 5:14–15 contain "belated information that Nehemiah also served as a governor" and that one cannot preclude that the information was added by authors in the fourth century (or even later) to contrast Nehemiah with the contemporary governors (Wright 2004, 179). He considers Neh 5:16–18 as belonging to the earliest layer of chapter 5 (Wright 2004, 186).

The governor describes the feast organized at his table. Unfortunately, he does not provide any information about its organization, location, items used by feasters, or circumstances, but he does mention the amounts of food served at the feast and the groups of people who participated. Nothing is explicit about the funding sources for this event or about who bore the burden of paying for it.

One question asked by scholars concerned the identity of the diners: among the governor's guests were the Judeans and the "officials" and "those who came to us from the nations around us." David Clines opined that the Judeans were "Jewish officials" (1984, 171), as did Hugh Williamson (1985, 232) and Antonius Gunneweg (1987, 90). Joseph Blenkinsopp believed that all those who attended the feasts were "the provincial bureaucracy, native and Persian delegations and visitors from other parts of the empire, family members, acquaintances, and assorted freeloaders" (1988, 265). Bob Becking only spoke of "staff members" (2018, 224). Lisbeth Fried argued that the text is corrupt and that the "Judeans" (יהודים) has replaced the "nobles" (חרים); thus, "the men who sat at Nehemiah's table were the Persian nobles residing in Judah, holders of estates granted by the king, satrap, or governor to friends and retainers" (Fried 2018, 827).

The other group was composed of "those who came to us from the nations around us." In the Nehemiah Memoir, members of other southern Levantine communities are the governor's opponents (Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite, and Geshem the Arab). Anne Fitzpatrick-McKinley (2015) argued that local politics in the southern Levant were very competitive and involved local elites vying with one another for dominance in the region. Moreover, Peter Altmann posited that the "nations around us" were Nehemiah's adversaries and that "Sanballat and company could fit in this category" (2016, 277).[6]

Another question asked by scholars concerned how such a feast was paid for: the huge amounts of meat and wine consumed during it must

[6] Note, however, that the dating of the passages concerning Nehemiah's adversaries to the Persian period is debatable; see Finkelstein 2018, 71–82, who argues that while the theme of adversaries may date to the Persian period, their naming is secondary and they represent the rivals of Judea in the Hasmonean period.

have costs a pretty penny. Altmann (2016, 287) argued that Nehemiah paid for it from his own wealth. Fried (2018, 824) proposed that the governor of Yehud owned an estate, similar to an *ulhi* ("house"), in or outside the province. In various Persepolis documents, we learn that the *ulhi* was, to quote Briant, "the ensemble of people who worked on an 'estate,' which includes lands and various kinds of farms and which is headed by the master of the house" (2002, 445). In recent years, archaeologists have identified numerous structures that dotted the Judean countryside in the Persian period (Fried 2018, 824). Their function is still unclear, but some were likely involved in agricultural production and would have supplied some of the food and drink for the governor's table.[7] Fried also argued that agricultural sites in the Rephaim Valley were likely the sources for much of the food and drink consumed at the feast (2018, 825). These sites must have been involved in the redistributive system of the province and functioned much like similar sites did in the countryside around Persepolis, which are known to have supplied the royal table. Apart from economic concerns, Fried, along with other scholars, opined that Nehemiah's table was also a local mimicry of the royal customs (Altmann 2016, 287). If we read Neh 5:17–18 against the background of Achaemenid rule, then we ought to look for any archaeological remains that can be linked to Persian-style banqueting in the province of Yehud and then to seek out any comparable material from other parts of the empire as a means to get a fuller picture of the phenomenon. First, however, I will discuss the feasts at the royal court of the Persian kings.

The Royal Table

The main *loci* of Achaemenid feasts were the royal centers in the imperial heartland—namely, Persepolis, Susa, and Pasargadae—and Babylon.

[7] See Faust 2018, who suggests that they were "estates" rather than forts or military installations, as is often proposed; also, see the more critical stance by Kletter and Silverman 2021, who argue that "estates" and "forts" should not be understood as mutually exclusive and that these buildings could have had multiple functions.

The king also feasted in different places outside these three cities owing to the court's nomadic nature.[8] Much information about Persian royal dining—descriptions of the courses, rituals, guests, staff, and so on—comes down to us from Greek authors who perceived the Persian court with numerous biases, presenting it as an example of Persian *tryphé* or "extravagance" (Briant 2002, 255–56). The administrative sources from the Iranian heartland merely refer to foodstuffs delivered to the royal court via the Persian supply chain created by the economic needs of Persepolis (Henkelman 2010, 676–92). They do help, however, to corroborate some aspects of the picture of royal feasting painted by Greek sources.

Greek authors emphasized the opulence of the royal table. Polyaenus, for example, quotes a list of items consumed daily by the king for lunch and dinner. Foodstuffs included flour, meat, spices, milk, fruit and wine. Once, when staying in Media, the king distributed food among his soldiers (Polyaenus, *Strat*. 4.3.32). Heracleides from Cumae, quoted by Athenaeus, also emphasizes the enormous numbers of animals slaughtered daily for the king's table. He adds that each royal guest could take home whatever he left untouched at the meal. Like in Polyaenus's account, the king offered food to his bodyguards and the lightly armed soldiers in his personal guard (Ath. 4.145b–46a). Reports about the allocation of large amounts of food for royal banquets are confirmed by texts from Persepolis from the reign of Darius I, the so-called "J Texts," which concern supplies sent to the royal table in Fars. The items included cattle, poultry, and various types of flour, oil, wine, and honey.[9]

The royal table boasted luxurious tableware. Athenaeus quotes letters attributed to Alexander the Great's commanders, who informed their leader about the loot of cups inlaid with precious stones captured in the wagon of Darius III near Damascus (Ath. 11.781f–82a). Among the types of vessels associated with the royal court, two of them were especially prominent: the Achaemenid *phialē* and *rhyton*. *Phialai* are shallow bowls with carinated shoulders and an everted rim. In our case,

[8] See, e.g., Briant 2002, 186–89; Henkelman 2010, 713–31; Llewellyn-Jones 2013, 74–95.

[9] See some texts in Kuhrt 2010, 607–9.

several pieces were recovered from the Achaemenid capitals: two silver *phialai* were found in Persepolis and another one was discovered on the acropolis of Susa (Colburn 2021, 194). Four silver unprovenanced *phialai* with an Old Persian inscription running around the edge of the vessels explicitly associate them with Artaxerxes I (Colburn 2020).

The links between the *rhyta*—animal-shaped drinking horns—and the king's table are less explicit. A glass *rhyton* in the shape of a bull was found in Persepolis. The gold lion-shaped object now in the British Museum comes from eastern Turkey (Ebbinghaus 2018). As Henry Colburn notes, the lion motifs are reminiscent of the Persepolis glyptic, which allows them to be associated with the royal court (Colburn 2021, 197). These objects could also be gifts from the king to representatives of local elites or satraps. The royal table could also have been a context for the exchange of gifts during its seasonal migrations.[10]

Another vessel that appears in the context of royal residences is the so-called "Achaemenid bowl." Depictions of this deep vessel with an everted rim appear on the Apadana reliefs from Persepolis, where it is carried by members of some delegations from different parts of the empire, including Ionians, Babylonians, and Bactrians. Metal Achaemenid bowls were found in the Persepolis treasury. Additionally, two golden bowls bearing inscriptions with the names of Darius I and Xerxes probably come from the area of Hamadan, ancient Ecbatana (Colburn 2021, 204). The royal centers provide the context for their use on the king's table. However, their significance goes beyond royal dining habits. The fact that the Apadana reliefs depict them carried by members of various delegations from across the empire indicates their use in different places throughout the empire. Thus, they could have served as a unifying item for the communities living under Achaemenid rule (Calmeyer 1993, 160). The fact that their imitations made of less prestigious materials (clay) were found in significant quantities in different parts of the empire—for example, Egypt, Asia Minor, Palestine, and Babylonia—indicates their spread beyond its heartland. Elspeth Dusinberre interpreted this phenomenon as a result of Achaemenid cultural influence across the empire (1999, 98–100), and Colburn

[10] On these phenomena, see Briant 2002, 302–15; Kistler 2010; Miller 2010.

pointed to their role in the expression of the social aspirations of the lower classes (2021, 205).

The setting was another important aspect of the feasts. As mentioned above, the main *loci* of the royal table were the major centers of the empire, namely, Persepolis, Susa, Ecbatana, and Babylon. These places featured impressive palaces, which included an *apadana*, a hypostyle ceremonial hall. Lush gardens—known as "paradises" (Briant 2002, 442–44)—were located in Pasargadae, near Persepolis (Jacobs 2021). Such gardens were also located near the residences of satraps and governors outside the imperial heartland.[11]

The setting of the feasts highlighted the importance of the monarch, who hosted the guests in his residences. The organization of the feast and its dynamics emphasized his status and place in the empire. Heracleides, for example, points out that only some participants of the royal table could eat with the king. However, they dined in his presence, though a veil separated them from the latter. Only during large ceremonies did all the guests feast together in one room. Heracleides's account gives the impression of there being concentric circles organized according to prestige, with the monarch at the center—thus emphasizing the place his place in the empire. However, lavish feasts were not solely the king's privilege. Heracleides mentions the most highly honored guests leaving the court after the first course was served in order to entertain their own guests (Ath. 4.145b–46a). The Persepolis Tablets point out that Irdabama (Darius I's mother or wife), Irtashtuna (*dukšiš*, a "royal woman"),[12] and Karkish, the satrap of Karmania, had their own tables (Henkelman 2010, 693–713).

The royal table was not simply one among many celebrations organized at the royal court. First, and foremost, it was a ritual that empha-

[11] For some sources, see Kuhrt 2010, 615–16; for Karačamirli in Azerbaijan, see Knauß et al. 2013; for possible gardens in Daskyleion in Phrygia, see Kaptan 2010, 831.

[12] In the Persepolis Tablets, according to Madreiter and Schnegg 2021, 1126, "the title *dukšiš* (pl. *dukšišbe*) denotes women who belong to the king's family, such as the princess(es), the king's wife, his sisters, and also the ruling queen, such as Amestris (wife of Xerxes)."

sized the king as the central and most powerful figure in the empire. Second, the unequal commensal circles mentioned by Heracleides reified the stratification of imperial elites. Thus, these feasts contributed to the distribution of social prestige. The custom of handing out gifts by the king was a conspicuous sign of royal favor. Thus, the king acted as a powerful patron for the imperial elites, who likewise acted as patrons for the satraps (and provincial officials), and the satraps posed as patrons for the local elites across the empire, who in turn were patrons of those who dwelled in their regions, a cascading effect emanating from the seat of the empire.

Thus, the royal table was a social and symbolic phenomenon *per se*. An anthropological theory of feasting and commensal politics will, therefore, aid us in understanding the key elements of this phenomenon.

Commensal Politics

Eating and drinking are not only physiological requirements for survival, but they are also social constructs. Social anthropologists have long pointed out the social consequences of food, its preparation, and its consumption.[13] Jack Goody (1982) emphasized that social hierarchies are often maintained by varying degrees of access to and control over food. Commensality is also much more than fellow feasters' conviviality. The banquet may have implications for the hierarchy within the group, the importance of individuals within it, and its identity and cohesion Feasts are in this way theaters of political relations and "provide an arena for both the highly condensed symbolic representation and the active manipulation of social relations" (Dietler 2010, 67). Dietler (2010) described three dimensions of commensal politics based on the consequences they may have for the political and social dynamics of a community: the empowering feast, the patron-role feast, and the diacritical feast.

Within the first dimension, egalitarian elites meet within communities where the social hierarchy is unclear. The feast "involves the

[13] See, e.g., Appadurai 1981; Bourdieu 1984.

manipulation of commensal hospitality toward the acquisition and maintenance of certain forms of symbolic capital, and sometimes economic capital" (Dietler 2010, 75). These feasts are competitive but do not necessarily result in the elimination of the competitor(s) by the host. They have implications for relative status, and their political effects may, therefore, be "subtle, limited, and thoroughly emphasized" (Dietler 2010, 77).

The second dimension, the patron-role feast, involves the "formalized use of commensal hospitality to symbolically reiterate and legitimize institutionalized relations of asymmetrical social power" (Dietler 2010, 82–83). Its organization requires the patron to have access to large quantities of food or exotic products served to feast participants. As hosts of such feasts occupy an elevated status in the community, the institutionalization of authority relies on this binding asymmetrical commensal link between unequal partners in a patron–client relationship. The guests are ready to accept their status of subordination to the host, who is in a certain way obliged to give the feast through the position he holds. On the other hand, the organization of feasts by the host begins to be perceived as his obligation to the group, which is associated with the institutionalization of his power (Dietler 2010, 83).

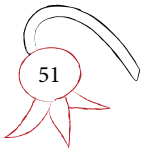
Finally, the third dimension, the diacritical feast, stresses the distinctiveness of the fellow feasters from the rest of the community by emphasising the exclusivity and elitist nature of the event by the use of luxurious or exotic dishes served on unique vessels and consumed in a distinctive place. In the words of Dietler himself:

> Diacritical stylistic distinctions may be based upon the use of rare, expensive, or exotic foods or food ingredients. Or they may be orchestrated through the use of elaborate food-service vessels and implements or architectonically distinguished settings that serve to "frame" elite consumption as a distinctive practice even when the food itself is not distinctive. Or they may be based upon differences in the complexity of the pattern of preparation and consumption of food and the specialized knowledge and taste (i.e. "cultural capital"). (Dietler 2010, 86)

Moreover, this type of feasting "is subject to emulation by those aspiring to higher status. Such emulation constitutes an attempted elevation

of status through representational means, which may focus on either (or both) the mimetic development of styles of action (manners, tastes, etc.) or the use and consumption of objects (foods, service vessels, etc.) that are materialized signs of a particular social identity" (Dietler 2010, 86). This dimension is characteristic of aristocratic and elitist circles and often serves as a tool to differentiate them from the rest of the community.[14]

The dimensions of feasts described by Dietler are analytical constructs, and we should not perceive them as mutually exclusive situations. Different dimensions may interrelate and overlap. The commensal habits of the Luo people from Kenya and Tanzania show that the hospitality characteristic for the empowering feast may help to build an institutionalized position in the patron-role feast (Dietler 2010, 103). Thus, one specific feast may have different dimensions.



We can now turn to two cases of feasting—material and textual references to feasting by local elites in the Persian Empire. Two places provide a fair number of sources for this practice: the Achaemenid satrapies of Lydia and Egypt. We will then finally be able to look at the case of Yehud.

Lydia

Lydia was one of the satrapies of Asia Minor. Greek authors mention Lydia relatively often because its satraps were involved in the conflicts between the Greek *poleis*. Plutarch mentions the palace of Tissaphernes, a satrap at the turn of the fifth and fourth centuries, located near Sardis. A lavish garden was planted near the residence (Plut. *Alc*. 24.7). Diodorus reports that after the Battle of Sardis in 395, the Spartan army devastated "Tissaphernes' garden and park (*parádeison tòn Tissaphérnous*), which had been beautifully laid out at great cost with plants and other things for luxury and enjoyment of peace of all good things" (Diod. Sic. 14.2). The archaeological material from the city and the countryside is

[14] A fine example is the Greek aristocratic symposium that provides a parallel to dining in the Persian Empire. See Węcowski 2014.

also quite extensive. The excavations in Sardis yielded a large assemblage of vessels dating to the period from c. 500 BCE to the Hellenistic period (Greenewalt 2010). Although large parts of the material remain unpublished, a general picture has emerged. The Achaemenid period saw changes from the preceding Lydian period. This is demonstrated in drinking and eating ware, as Iranian-style vessels replaced the local ones, such as *skyphoi*, two-handled wine cups (Dusinberre 1999, 96, 127).

The excavations in Sardis revealed a number of Persian-style metal vessels. These contain a silver *phiale*, a ladle with a calf-head terminal, a fluted jar, and three additional saucers.[15] Moreover, metal vessels were found that stem from graves in the eastern part of Lydia in the upper Hermos region (modern Gediz). Two silver *phialai*, including one decorated with eighteen male heads, were found in the İkiztepe tumulus. A silver *phiale* from the site contains gold decorations depicting a Persian king/hero, and another Achaemenid silver bowl probably comes from the site in Gökçeler.[16]

Drinking appears in depictions of elite members attending a reclining banquet. The most famous of these representations come from the tomb in Karaburun, which is dated to around 470 BCE (Dusinberre 2013, 22). One of the depictions shows a man wearing a Persian garment with rosettes and jewelry and holding a chalice in the Achaemenid style in his hand; his servant balances a cup on three fingertips (Mellink 1972, 265). This feat required specific skills and practice and is associated with Persian drinking culture. Xenophon mentions that Cyrus was supposed to have learned the correct way to hold a cup on three fingertips at the court of Astyages (*Cyr.* 1.3.8). The representation of this method appears in the iconography of seals from Persepolis (PFS 170), as well as in other places in the empire (Colburn 2021, 198). Although

[15] See objects in Waldbaum 1983, nos. 963–69; Greenewalt et al. 1993, 35–37; Dusinberre 2013, 132–33.

[16] See Cahill 2010, cat. nos. 167, 168, 189. The pictures are also available at the website of the Archaeological Exploration of Sardis at https://sardisexpedition.org/en/artifacts?publication_name%5B%5D=LATW (accessed October 14, 2025).

no such depictions of the king or people drinking at court exist, it seems to have been one of the symbols of Persian style across the empire. For the local Lydian elites, possessing such vessels could mean belonging to the broader imperial Persian culture. Lydians could learn how to drink and eat in Persian style at the satrapal court in Sardis, or in Persepolis and Susa. An extensive network of roads, including the Royal Road connecting Sardis with Susa, fostered connectivity throughout the empire.[17] Moreover, at the court of a satrap or a king Lydians could receive prestigious Persian drinking vessels as gifts.

The Achaemenid period was a time of change when it came to the drinking practices of the broader subset of the Lydian population. Another vessel characteristic of Lydia in the Achaemenid period is the so-called "Achaemenid bowl," a deep cup with a carinated rim. These handleless, wine-drinking cups made in Sardis from local clay became extremely widespread during the Achaemenid period. Their finds span from the earliest Achaemenid deposits to the Hellenistic period. The large number of finds indicate their use by the wider population. Dusinberre argued that "this indicates some profound shifts in cultural Sardis in the Achaemenid period, probably to do with drinking styles introduced by the elite which non-elites then emulated" (1999, 96).

Egypt

We have three silver *phialai* that stem from Tell Timai in the Eastern Delta. Some authors have dated them to the Ptolemaic period, but the site's context and stylistic analogies with Artaxerxes's *phialai* have led others to date them to the Persian period.[18] Another site from the Eastern Delta that yielded silver *phialai*—two, in this case—is Tell el-Maskuta. One contains an Aramean inscription linking the vessel to Kainu, the king of Kedar: "that which Kainu, son of Geshem, king of Kedar, offered to Hanilat" (TADAE D5.14). The inscription is paleo-

[17] On connectivity and communication in the Persian Empire, see, e.g., Briant 2002, 357–87; Kuhrt 2014.

[18] See the discussion in Colburn 2021, 206.

graphically dated to c. 400 BCE but may have been added later (Colburn 2021, 207). The Kedarites were a North Arabian group allied with the Achaemenids. According to Herodotus, their representatives probably facilitated the route of Cambyses's army through the Sinai (Hdt. 3.88.1) and may have been present in the satrapy since the sixth century (Graf 1990). Indeed, Isaac Rabinowitz argued that the Arabs were garrisoned at Tell el-Maskuta by Darius I to guard the canal linking the Red Sea with the Mediterranean (1956, 9). Thus, Kainu seems to be a leader of the group that helped to secure the Persian hold over Egypt. Some metal Achaemenid bowls made of silver (Tell Timai; Tell el-Maskuta) and bronze (Thebes) have also been found in Egypt. The one from Tell el-Maskuta, like the silver *phialē* just mentioned, contains a dedicatory inscription for the Arabian goddess Hanilat, which places them in the context of the Arab presence in Persian Egypt (Colburn 2021, 211). It is significant that some of the bowls also contain Egyptian stylistic elements. This indicates that they were crafted in Egypt for an Egyptian audience (Colburn 2021, 212).

Persian-style vessels made of other materials are much more numerous. Ceramic Achaemenid bowls have been found in larger quantities, including at Tell Dafana (Delta), Heliopolis, Thebes, Karnak, and the Kharga and Dakhla oases in the Western Desert. Significantly, these ceramic imitations come from many places in Egypt and are not limited to centers of imperial administration. Moreover, some of these imitations have round ring bases, which allows them to be put away half-empty without pouring out the liquid. For these reasons, Colburn believed that they spread independently in Egypt and were adapted to local needs and integrated into Egyptian dining practices (2021, 213–15).

Excavations in Egypt also yielded some *rhyta*. A fragment of a faience object was found at Canopus in the Western Delta, and a ceramic *rhyton* was found that came from a grave in Suwa near modern Zagazig. Three more such objects remain unprovenanced. Some of them were made of local materials (Colburn 2021, 207–9). Although no metal *rhyta* have been found in Egypt, we have literary evidence of their use. Athenaeus, citing a letter from Cleomenes of Naucratis sent to Alexander, mentions the loot that was captured at Memphis (see Briant 2002, 294–96). Among the longer list of cups that were captured are

rhyta (Ath. 11.784a–b). The fact that the loot was captured in Memphis indicates that these drinking horns were part of the furnishings of the satrap's court.

It seems that the use and possession of Achaemenid vessels was a status marker in Persian Egypt. This pertains to both metal vessels and imitations made of cheaper materials. For local elites, the use of metal bowls and *phialai* could bring them closer to the Persian elites. Colburn argued that these vessels "nevertheless functioned as a means of creating new social distinctions at the expense of traditional elites, or maintaining existing ones in the face of social and political changes brought on by Achaemenid rule" (2021, 219). In this way, the phenomenon of royal gifting was a tool for creating new elites. The Achaemenid *phialai* most likely entered Egypt as gifts from the Great King or any number of his satraps. Thus, they were status markers because they were objects linking the recipient with the king in the context of the royal banquet. Moreover, their imitations made of less prestigious materials equally played their role as a marker of the cultural aspirations of the lower strata of the population. This conclusion brings to mind the Achaemenid clay bowls from Sardis. Thus, Persian-style feasting and drinking was a well-established phenomenon in Achaemenid Egypt, whose cultural significance influenced the local elites. Now, after having discussed Lydia and Egypt, we can return to Yehud.

Yehud

Unfortunately, excavations at sites in the former province of Yehud have not yielded any metal vessels that can be associated with the Persian drinking style. In Palestine, metal vessels recovered so far have come from Ain Shems, Lachish, and Tell Safi in Philistia (Stern 1982b, 268), and more bronze objects have come from Khirbet Ibsan to the west of the Sea of Galilee (Amiran 1972). Finally, ceramic Achaemenid bowls were found in several sites in Palestine, including Ein Gedi in Yehud (Stern 1982b, 95).

Although no metal *rhyta* have been found in Palestine, zoomorphic vessels resembling Persian patterns have been discovered stem in the

region. Ephraim Stern (1982a) divided them into four types. First, there is the animal-headed beaker in the shape of a ram that comes from Samaria. Second, we have curved *rhyta* with a crouched-animal base that come from Tel Mevorakh on the Carmel coast, Tel Jemmeh in Philistia, Tel el-Hesi in Philistia (this one was made of travertine and supposedly originated in Egypt), and Khirbet esh-Sheikh Ibrahim (Horvat Dorban) in Yehud. The lion-faced gryphon found at Sepphoris is an Attic imitation of the Achaemenid *rhyton*. Third, there is the so-called "horn *rhyton*" shaped like an elongated horn. This type is represented by the clay, ram-shaped rhyton found at Tell Abu Hawam on the bank of the Kishon River. Fourth, there are "everyday" vessels such as jugs and amphorae with animal-shaped handles. A single fragment found in Ein Gedi is probably the handle of a vessel in the shape of an animal (a lioness?). It appears to imitate Achaemenid metal prototypes (Stern 1982a, 42). Stern argued that all these objects (except the Attic rhyton from Sepphoris and the travertine vessel from Tell el-Hesi) are examples of the imitation of Achaemenid patterns by local potters (Stern 1982b, 42). Moreover, they are "clearly made of local clay" (Stern 1982b, 38). The fact that they are local crafts—two (Ein Gedi, Khirbet esh-Sheikh Ibrahim) stem from Yehud—indicates that local potters were familiar with their prototypes, which were likely used in Palestine. The hypothetical prototypes, *rhyta* made of prestigious metals, have not survived, possibly due to their having been melted down in later periods.

Although the governor's report in Neh 5:17–18 does not mention the location of the feast, we should expect that its locus was the local center of Persian power, as was the case with Lydia (Sardis) and Egypt (Memphis). In Yehud, such a place would be the governor's residence. The location scholars have proposed is Ramat Raḥel, a site located south of Jerusalem. It lies on a hill close to two vital roads in Yehud: the King's Highway from Jerusalem toward Beersheba and the road leading toward the Coastal Plain along the Valley of Rephaim. Excavations conducted since the beginning of the twentieth century have revealed structures interpreted as an administrative center functioning from the eighth to the seventh centuries to the Persian period (Lipschits et al. 2017, 35–118). Two key finds indicate the importance of this place in the Persian

period. The first consists of *yhwd* stamp seals (65 percent of the total found in the province), which support the claim that the site functioned as a local administrative and redistributive center (Lipschits et al. 2017, 98). Moreover, the storage jars discovered there testify to the large storage capacities of the site (Lipschits et al. 2021, 48–57). The second is the surroundings of the buildings: analysis of plant pollen from the site has made it possible to better understand the site's verdure during the Persian period (Lipschits et al. 2012). The garden boasted imported trees and plants such as the Lebanese cedar, citron, and Persian walnut, which do not occur naturally in the Palestinian flora. Other plants—like the willow, water lily, and poplar—needed large amounts of water provided by an irrigation system (Lipschits et al. 2017, 110–11). This image brings to mind the gardens surrounding the royal residences and the seats of the satraps.

The proposed identification of Ramat Raḥel as the seat of the Persian governor has enormous ramifications for understanding Neh 5:17–18. We must emphasize the Persian context of Nehemiah's feast: it was held in a place of power, the Persian governor's headquarters, surrounded by a Persian garden. It is possible that the Persian symbolism went beyond this and was even more explicit. Christine Mitchell argued that a winged disc, like the flying sun-disk representing Ahuramazda found in Achaemenid iconography, could have been present in the palace in Ramat Raḥel (2016, 89).[19] As local elites may have traveled to other centers of Persian power (e.g., the court of the satrap of Beyond the River or Egypt), they could recognize it as a symbol of Persian power. Ideas, people, and objects could move quickly throughout the empire thanks to the communication system ensuring interconnectivity between the provinces (Colburn 2013). We do not know if the governors of Yehud possessed prestigious Persian vessels, but the Royal Road network may have facilitated their circulation across the empire. Although no such item stems from Yehud, imitations made from local clay indicate they were known to the Yehudites. As Ramat Raḥel was a local redistribution center, many locals must have visited the place and seen or heard about the banqueting items. Although the Nehemiah Memoir does not

[19] On the winged disk in Achaemenid art, see Root 1979, 169–76.

mention banqueting staff, its organization necessitates cooks, service, and the like. All this may have contributed to the spread of knowledge about the Persian banquet inside the small population of Yehud.

Despite the influence of Persian-style feasting on the lower social strata, governor feasts seem to have remained elite affairs. The possible use of prestigious vessels and the consumption of quantities of meat emphasized the exclusive character of the Persian feast. The same was true for their location. A lush garden planted in the dry climate of the semi-arid areas south of Jerusalem must have impressed those passing nearby and visiting the site. Its location near two main roads leading south and west meant that most people heading into the city could see it. Thus, Ramat Raḥel was a landmark of Yehud, providing—to use Dietler's terminology—a frame for the diacritical feast. The governor's feast in Yehud could be, as in the cases of Lydia and Egypt, a local instance of Persian-style feasting in the empire.

Conclusion

This article has examined the occurrences of dining in the Persian style across the Persian Empire. Although the material comes from three distinct regions, we can draw some conclusions about the empire in general and about the province of Yehud in particular.

Local Elites and the Persian Empire

Even though the source material is uneven, we were able to discuss Persian-style banqueting in three parts of the Persian Empire. As we lack sources for many parts of the Achaemenid Empire, we cannot say that it was the case elsewhere. However, at least in Lydia, Egypt, and Yehud, Persian-style feasting originating at the court of Great Kings appears to have been a custom that influenced local elites. The administrative centers in satrapies and provinces were places where new eating and drinking patterns spread locally. This phenomenon's nature was diacritical, which allowed local elites to emphasize their position and symbolically indicate their distinctiveness from the rest of the population. The Persian feasting style and drinking cups used during feasts were

a tool for social distinction that allowed members of the elite to emphasize their social standing. The prestigious nature of these feasts was not limited to the location and vessels used. The participation therein required the knowledge of specific customs and skills, as vessels had to be handled properly. One could not put away a half-empty *rhyton* without making a mess on the table. The Achaemenid *phialai* had to be held correctly on the tips of three fingers, as shown by the iconography from Lydia (see above), Babylonia (Kuhrt 2010, 872), and Egypt (Wasmuth 2017). Moreover, the lower social classes imitated the new customs of the elites. It points to the impact that the Achaemenid Empire had on broader groups of conquered populations.

Politics and Patronage in Yehud

The feasts, apart from their role in the politics of Yehud, may also have had consequences for the spread of Persian culture in the province. It is probably no coincidence that Neh 5:17–18 is just one of several passages in the Hebrew Bible influenced by Persian-style feasting (Mathys 2010). The Persian influence on Yehud seems to have been be quite significant.

The Nehemiah Memoir (if we consider that the parts relating to Nehemiah's conflicts with Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem have historical value for our knowledge of the fifth century) indicates that politics in Yehud was highly competitive, with local elites vying for power with contenders from and outside the province. Participation in feasts could therefore have influenced the composition of the elites in the province. Being invited affected a person's position; on the contrary, the exclusion from the governor's banquet would have been a blow to one's prestige and sociopolitical standing. Feasts contributed to the distribution of prestige and—as Colburn postulated for Egypt (see above)—resulted in the confirmation of the position of *homines novi* in Yehud. The acquisition of skills associated with imperial culture may have been important for distinguishing local elites amid elite rivalry in the provinces. A possible analogy is found in Boris Chrubasik's discussion of the elites in Hekatomnid Caria in the fourth century BCE, where "being the best in Greekness" and adopting "Greek cultural elements could give local elites a political tool for their intra-community competition, differentiating themselves from their social competitors" (2017, 106).

The governor's feasts were more than diacritical. The governor, in my view, could have had access to sufficient resources that would allow him to pose as a powerful patron in the province, and Fried has already argued for the governor's table as a patron-role feast (Fried 2018, 831). However, this dimension of the feast could have had more far-reaching ramifications than just strengthening his authority. Patronage was a phenomenon deeply rooted in Palestine and the entire southern Levant, and its features permeated social and political life (Pfoh 2016). One can argue that the feasts were integrated into the native political culture and thus "glocalized" into social mechanisms rooted in Yehud. With the king as the supreme patron in the empire, satraps, local governors, and local officials could have served as middle patrons (or brokers) in their administrative units and beyond, as could be the case for Tobiah, one of Nehemiah's main adversaries (Edelman 2022). One could argue that drinking parties also provided a context for establishing patron–client relations with satraps and other Persian officials in Lydia and Egypt. It was relevant not only to those indulging in the feasts, but also to all engaged in supplying, preparing, serving, and protecting them (if the leftovers were distributed after the banquet was over, as was probably the case for Great King's table).

In this way, Persian-style feasting was not only an opportunity for local elites to showcase their status; it also served as one of the tools that bound together the vast territories and populations of the Achaemenid Empire under Persian rule.

Abbreviations

PFS – Persepolis Fortification Seal
TADAE – *Textbook of Aramaic Documents from Ancient Egypt*. Edited by Bezalel Porten and Ada Yardeni. 1986–1999. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns.

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