

WIFE, CONCUBINE, OR ROYAL FAVORITE? ESTHER'S POSITION AT THE COURT OF
XERXES

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CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	iii
INTRODUCTION	1
THE ANCIENT SOURCES	6
THE DATE AND GENRE OF THE BOOK OF ESTHER.....	10
VASHTI, ESTHER AND AMESTRIS	14
BIBLICAL, PERSIAN, AND GREEK TITLES FOR ROYAL WOMEN	19
Biblical Titles for Royal Women	19
Persian Titles for Royal Women	23
Greek Titles for Royal Women	24
ROYAL FEMALE POSITIONS AT THE ACHAEMENID COURT.....	26
Legal Wives.....	26
Concubines	34
Summary: Female Positions at the Persian Court	41
ASPECTS OF THE ESTHER STORY IN A PERSIAN CONTEXT.....	43
Vashti at Xerxes' Banquet.....	43
Esther's Concealed Identity.....	46
Selection of Young Women	47
Coronation, Feast, and Marks of Queenship	50
Entering the King's Presence	52
A Royal Woman (Not) Acting as Intercessor	53
CONCLUSION.....	56
APPENDIX: A CHRONOLOGY OF XERXES' REIGN	59
BIBLIOGRAPHY	60

ABSTRACT

This study examines Esther's role at Xerxes' court within the context of Achaemenid history. While the Esther story portrays its heroine as Xerxes' queen (מֶלְכָּה), extrabiblical evidence suggests that the Persian Empire did not maintain a clearly defined office of "queen." Instead, royal women appear to have risen and fallen in prominence within the Persian harem primarily through gaining and losing their hold on the king's affection. Considering Persian, Greek, and biblical evidence, this study argues for the *possibility* that the author of the Esther story employs מֶלְכָּה to mark his heroine, not as Xerxes' sole legal wife, but as his favorite concubine who rose to preeminence through personal favor rather than official rank. Identifying Esther as a concubine alleviates several problems frequently associated with classifying her as the sole reigning queen.

INTRODUCTION

“Now the king was attracted to Esther more than to any of the other women, and she won his favor and approval more than any of the other virgins. So he set a royal crown on her head and made her queen [מלכה] instead of Vashti” (Esther 2:17, NIV). And so a Judahite girl, with no claim to royal power apart from her loveliness, found herself elevated to the throne of the world’s mightiest empire. Her given Hebrew name was Hadassah, but her new husband did not know that and seemed not to care. To Xerxes, who hailed himself “the great king, king of kings, king of countries containing all kinds of men,”¹ her ethnicity mattered far less than her physique. Yet a devout Judahite listening to her story knew that it was certainly not merely Hadassah’s charm that earned her the royal crown. No worshipper of Israel’s God could miss the hand of Yahweh revealed throughout Hadassah’s story in a series of providential “coincidences.” Hadassah had come to her royal position “for such a time as this” (4:14), to serve as Yahweh’s instrument in delivering his chosen people from a would-be holocaust. As such, she rightly earned her place as one of the most famous heroines in the Bible, known (perhaps a little ironically) by the non-Hebrew name with which she ruled: Esther, Queen of Persia.²

Those who profess to worship Yahweh still today rightly focus on his providential care as the core of Esther’s story. But the book of Esther³ is fascinating for another reason. Given its setting at the court of a Persian monarch, the story of Esther also finds significance in the corpus

1. From Xerxes’ inscription at Lake Van. In Amélie Kuhrt, *The Persian Empire: A Corpus of Sources from the Achaemenid Period* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 305.

2. The irony is heightened when we consider the name Esther is derived from the Mesopotamian goddess Ishtar.

3. This paper focuses on the Masoretic Text of Esther rather than the Greek version with additions; all references to the book of Esther hereafter are exclusively the MT version.

of sources for Achaemenid Persian history. Among biblical scholars and historians of ancient Persia, Esther has proven remarkably controversial. Debate rages about how exactly one ought to view this account of a Judahite girl elevated to the most powerful position in the world. Is the story of Esther genuine history? A pious novella? A comedy? A glorified advertisement for the Purim festival? Scholars vary widely in their opinions. In large part this is because, while the setting of Esther seems to indicate its author's intimate familiarity with the Persian court,⁴ the actual events of the story appear implausible and entirely uncorroborated. No Vashti, Esther, or Haman is known outside of this account. The threatened extermination of the Judahites is unknown and seems unlikely given the Persians' general imperial policies.⁵ Scholars have pointed out other discrepancies, such as that the author of Esther speaks of 127 "provinces," but extrabiblical (Greek and Persian) sources speak of only around thirty satrapies,⁶ or that the plot is based on the improbable principle that a Persian king's edicts, once issued, could not be revoked.⁷

Perhaps the most significant discrepancy between the Esther story and other sources for Persian history, however, is its portrayal of Esther as queen of Persia. The problem is simple: the

4. Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones, *Ancient Persia and the Book of Esther: Achaemenid Court Culture in the Hebrew Bible* (London: I. B. Tauris/Bloomsbury, 2023), 2–4. That Esther is a genuine Achaemenid-era composition is the main thesis of Llewellyn-Jones' book.

5. The Persians have frequently been described as more tolerant or enlightened rulers than other Ancient Near Eastern empires such as the Assyrians, but Kuhrt (Amélie Kuhrt, "The Cyrus Cylinder and Achaemenid Imperial Policy," *JSOT* 25 [1983]: 83–97) points out that this is largely an assumption drawn from the depiction of Cyrus in the Bible and in the Cyrus Cylinder. She notes that these two sources are far from representative and that Persian imperial policy was not abundantly different from that of Assyria.

6. Herodotus mentions how Darius I, the father of Xerxes, divided his empire into twenty satrapies (Hdt. 3.89). Several Persian inscriptions list between 23 and 31 satrapies; see, Kuhrt, *The Persian Empire: A Corpus of Sources from the Achaemenid Period*: Behistun Inscription: 23 satrapies (Kuhrt, 141); DPe: 24 satrapies (Kuhrt, 486); XPh: DSe: 27 satrapies (Kuhrt, 491); DNa: 29 satrapies (Kuhrt, 502); 31 satrapies (Kuhrt, 304–5). See also Llewellyn-Jones, *Ancient Persia and the Book of Esther*, 23–24. Morteza Arabzadeh Sarbanani provides a rationale for why the Hebrew word frequently translated as "satrapies" should instead be understood to refer to smaller administrative territories within satrapies (Sarbanani, "Revisiting the Book of Esther: Assessing the Historical Significance of the Masoretic Version for the Achaemenian History," *Persia Antiqua* 3, no. 4 [January 2023], 22–24).

7. Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2001), 133. See also Llewellyn-Jones, *Ancient Persia and the Book of Esther*, 115.

story seemingly portrays Esther as the single wife of Xerxes, occupying an established royal position of “queen,” yet from what we know of Persian history the Achaemenids apparently recognized no such official position. Persian monarchs appear to have married multiple wives and kept numerous concubines, and there is no clear indication that any one of them was ever elevated to an established position of “queen.” To complicate matters further, there seem to have been strict criteria as to whom the king could select as his wife—criteria that an insignificant Judahite girl, whose ethnicity and ancestry were not even known to Xerxes, almost certainly would not have met. Then there is the problem that we know the name of Xerxes’ wife, Amestris, and attempts to equate Amestris with either Vashti or Esther have so far proven unconvincing (see below).

What then are we to make of the Esther story? Could Esther, as portrayed in her book, have fit into the context of the Achaemenid court? What exactly was her role? Was she the chief wife of Xerxes? One of a number of legal wives? A favored concubine? My goal in this paper is to answer the following question: if we *assume* that the book of Esther relates actual history, how should we understand Esther’s precise position at the Persian court? I have not set out to *prove* or even *argue* that Esther actually existed and that the events of her story are true; that is ultimately impossible unless another ancient source were to emerge to corroborate the Esther story. For now, arguments for Esther’s historicity amount to “could be” arguments, as Fox characterizes them.⁸

I will address the above questions in the following way. I begin by analyzing the ancient sources that shed light on the Achaemenid court and the position of royal women within it. These include Persian texts, Greek histories, and other biblical references. I then explore the opinions of current scholarship regarding Esther’s date of composition and genre. Next, I analyze arguments attempting to link Amestris with either Vashti or Esther. I then examine the specific words used in Persian, Greek, and biblical sources to refer to royal women in their various

8. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, 136.

positions. I explore what else we can know about these various positions—specifically those of the king’s chief wife (and whether there really existed such a position), other legal wives, and concubines—from our ancient sources. Finally, I examine how several key details in the Esther story fit into what we know about Persian court history. A conclusion summarizes my findings.

My hope is that this paper will help place Esther in her proper Achaemenid context. While the topics I cover are relevant to the larger discussion about Esther’s genre and canonicity, my paper is not dedicated to proving a position for either. Given the historical acceptance of the book of Esther in the canon of Scripture and its presentation of itself as a record of true historical events (though some scholars dispute this; see below), I have approached the text beginning with the default position that it records actual history. That being said, I have attempted to approach the text without an apologetic zeal to prove its accuracy. I also recognize the obvious fact that the story of Esther is a carefully crafted narrative containing “highly dramatic elements.”⁹

I also hope that this paper can address the question of Esther’s role from a unique perspective. While most commentaries on Esther by canonically committed scholars address the historicity of Esther’s story, they tend to be brief and focus on proving that the various historical details in Esther *could* be accurate. Attempts to deal with Esther’s place at the court generally amount to finding space for her as the single reigning queen, either by identifying her with Xerxes’ consort Amestris or by positing that Amestris was deposed and reinstalled, creating a gap into which Esther’s queenship could be placed. As I discuss below, I find these solutions unconvincing. I will attempt to argue that the ancient evidence allows for another possibility, namely that the events of the Esther story could all have taken place while Amestris remained prominent at Xerxes’ court.

The most helpful scholarly works in addressing Esther’s place at the Persian court are not biblical commentaries but rather the works of two scholars specializing in Achaemenid history:

9. Forrest S. Weiland, “Historicity, Genre, and Narrative Design in the Book of Esther,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 159, no. 634 (2002): 153.

Maria Brosius' *Women in Ancient Persia* and Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones' *Ancient Persia and the Book of Esther* and *King and Court in Ancient Persia*. Brosius explores all the ancient evidence for royal Persian women and evaluates the ancient sources, especially those written by the Greeks. She notes the biases and projections of the classical authors and suggests that much of what the Greeks wrote about Achaemenid women cannot be taken at face value. Her book is the most complete study of Persian women. Llewellyn-Jones provides an updated look at the Persian court and applies Achaemenid studies to the Esther story specifically. Llewellyn-Jones has no canonical commitments and argues that Esther is clearly a work of fiction. His main thesis, however, is that it is a genuine Achaemenid-era composition written by someone with an intimate knowledge of the Persian court. As such, he believes it ought to be included in the corpus for Achaemenid studies as a most useful resource. I have drawn heavily on the works of these two scholars throughout my paper.

One important disclaimer: while my Hebrew, Greek, and Latin are sufficient to allow me to approach the ancient sources in those languages directly, I have not studied Old Persian, Elamite, or any other Ancient Near Eastern languages. To access such sources, I have relied on distinguished scholars such as Amélie Kuhrt, whose *The Persian Empire: A Corpus of Sources of the Achaemenid Period* is an indispensable tool for the study of ancient Persian history. I have also heavily relied on the work of Maria Brosius for my study of Persian titles for royal women.¹⁰

10. Maria Brosius, *Women in Ancient Persia, 559–331 B.C.* (Oxford: Clarendon Press / Oxford University Press, 1996).

THE ANCIENT SOURCES

The study of Achaemenid Persian history suffers from an appalling paucity of ancient written sources. Contrary to past generations, which often explored Persian history solely through the lens of classical historians, modern scholars rightly prioritize texts and other archeological discoveries from the Persians themselves.¹¹ Unfortunately, as Lenfant explains, “proper Persian evidence is so scarce that it is not easy to discover information about the Persians, much less Persian women.”¹² The Persians left us no narrative histories.¹³ Persian sources consist mostly of royal inscriptions and administrative records (particularly the large cache of tablets discovered at Persepolis), as well as various iconographic sources (such as personal seals and palace reliefs). Despite references to royal records and/or lists of benefactors in the biblical texts¹⁴ and Greek sources,¹⁵ no such records survive for us today.¹⁶ Persian sources shed no light on the historical events or characters described in the Esther story.¹⁷

11. Maria Brosius, *A History of Ancient Persia: The Achaemenid Empire* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2021), 2.

12. Dominique Lenfant, “Polygamy in Greek Views of Persians,” *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* 59, no. 1 (2019): 16.

13. Darius I’s Behistun Inscription is the only text that comes close to a narrative.

14. Ezra 4:15,19; 5:17; 6:1–2; Esth 2:23; 6:1; 10:2.

15. Diodorus Siculus 2.32.4; Hdt. 8.85.

16. Pierre Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander: A History of the Persian Empire*, trans. Peter T. Daniels (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2002), 6. Briant notes that the annals mentioned in the biblical texts are likely administrative, not narrative.

17. Commentators and apologists sometimes point to a reference in a Persian source to an official named *Marduka* as extrabiblical evidence for Esther’s Mordecai. Clines (David J. A. Clines, “In Quest of the Historical Mordecai,” *Vetus Testamentum* 41, no. 2 (1991): 129–136.) demonstrates that the existence of a man with the same name hardly proves the existence of this particular Mordecai.

This does not mean that Persian sources cannot help us in our study of Esther's *setting* and the role of royal women at the Persian court in general. Tablets record the names of various royal women as well as their titles, giving us clues as to their positions relative to each other and the king. Equally important is how these Persian sources reveal deficiencies in our non-Persian sources and vice versa. For example, the Persepolis Fortification and Treasury tablets contain seventy-five mentions of a Persian woman named Irdabama, likely the mother of Darius I, who is depicted as immensely rich and powerful. Yet Irdabama is totally absent in the Greek sources.¹⁸ Meanwhile the wife of several Persian kings and mother of Xerxes, Atossa, appears prominently in Greek sources but not Persian sources.¹⁹ This is important for our study of Esther. It is not entirely safe for scholars to reject the historicity of characters like Esther or Vashti simply because they are uncorroborated in Greek or Persian texts, given the deficiency of both.

While a study of Persian history must begin with Persian sources, it cannot remain there. The many blanks must be filled in by non-Persian sources, specifically the classical Greek authors. The Greeks had much to say about the Persians in general and their royal women specifically. Yet while one could hardly write a history of the Persians without Greek histories, we must employ them carefully. The Greek historians were generally prone to caricaturing the Persians as the great oriental "other," and utilized several motifs in their depictions of royal women. Brosius notes that Greek evidence "has led to generalizations about royal women that beneath their surface lack any substantial foundation."²⁰ Greek authors intentionally contrasted their own cultural mores with the decadence of the Persians, their great rivals, and recorded tales that emphasized the cruelty, absurdity, and vindictiveness that went hand in hand with oriental

18. Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones, *Persians: The Age of the Great Kings* (New York: Basic Books, 2022), 179–81.

19. Yazdan Safaee, "Achaemenid Women: Putting the Greek Image to the Test," *Talanta* 48–49 (2016–17), 115–16. Safaee notes that Atossa appears in two Persepolis texts with the name Udusa. Brosius (*Women in Ancient Persia*, 14) was unaware of two references to Atossa in the Persepolis archive and so states that she was entirely unmentioned. See also Wouter F. M. Henkelman, "Xerxes, Atossa, and the Persepolis Fortification Archive," *Annual Report 2010* (Leiden: Netherlands Institute for the Near East; Istanbul: Netherlands Institute in Turkey, 2010).

20. Brosius, *Women in Ancient Persia*, 1.

despotism. This no doubt influenced their depiction of Persian royal women.²¹ Safaee notes that “according to Greek sources, the role of women in the policy of the Achaemenid court becomes prominent only when the narrative is about the planning of conspiracy or treason. In such a context women, hitherto unattended in these sources, come into view all of a sudden and attain a strong role in destructive activities.”²² Herodotus’ *Histories* are replete with examples of negative Persian traits, so it is reasonable to apply caution to his depiction of Persian women. For example, he records the horrific story of Amestris’ (Xerxes’ wife’s) revenge on the wife of Masistes, with whom Xerxes had become infatuated.²³ Greeks also liked to perpetuate the myth that royal women were frequently the real power behind the throne, pulling the strings to prompt their men into wicked decisions,²⁴ such as when Herodotus suggests that Atossa (Darius’ consort) was responsible for prompting Darius’ infamous invasion of Greece.²⁵ The Greeks also were fascinated by the exotic Persian harem and would naturally have been inclined to believe sensational reports. For example, Greek writers record that the Persian king’s harem supposedly included a woman for every night of the year.²⁶ Plato argues that the Persian kings’ decadence and softness were byproducts of their being raised in the harem, where they were deprived of strong male influence and were instead pampered by doting Persian women.²⁷ In summary, given the antipathy and cultural differences between Greeks and Persians, we must be cautious in treating as history what may very well be rumor and stereotype.

21. Brosius, *Women in Ancient Persia*, 1.

22. Safaee, “Achaemenid Women: Putting the Greek Image to the Test,” 125–26.

23. Hdt. 9.108–113.

24. Henkelman, “Xerxes, Atossa, and the Persepolis Fortification Archive, 33.”

25. Hdt. 3.134.

26. Diodorus 17.77.6; Plutarch, *Artaxerxes*, 27.2; Athenaeus 13.557.

27. Plato, *Laws*, 694b–696a.

The Greeks also tended to impose their own cultural assumptions about the status and roles of women onto their understanding of other cultures. For the Greeks, women were often erratic, unstable, cowardly, and dangerous.²⁸ There also existed a stark contrast between classes of females. There were legal wives, professional courtesans, and concubines/prostitutes, a categorization best summarized by Pseudo-Demosthenes: “We have courtesans for pleasure, concubines for the daily functions of the body, and wives for bearing legitimate children and for taking good care of the household.”²⁹ Greeks also assumed that legitimate wives ought to be generally invisible in the community. We must take these factors into account when we consider how the Greeks classified and described Achaemenid women.

Biblical references also supplement our limited Persian sources. While other portions of Scripture will inform our understanding of how Judahites perceived royal women in general, there is but a single reference to a Persian woman outside the book of Esther. Nehemiah 2:6 mentions the king speaking to Nehemiah with his consort (נָשָׁא) sitting beside him. It is the book of Esther that includes the most information about royal Persian women.

28. Safaee, “Achaemenid Women: Putting the Greek Image to the Test,” 101–32.

29. Demosthenes, 59.122 (*Against Neaera*), author's translation. Although included in the Demosthenic corpus, the speech was delivered by Apollodorus of Acharnae and may have been composed by him as well.

THE DATE AND GENRE OF THE BOOK OF ESTHER

There is no consensus in the scholarly community regarding Esther's date of composition or genre. Both are relevant to our study of Esther's position within Xerxes' court. Regarding the date of composition, possibilities span from the decades immediately after Xerxes' reign to 73 BC, the latest possible date at which the Greek version of Esther arrived in Egypt.³⁰ The primary pieces of evidence for an early date are the author's apparent familiarity with the customs of the Achaemenid court and the inclusion of many Persian words and idioms, but no Greek words. Friedberg has noted that the month formula utilized in Esther also argues for an early (late fifth century BC) composition, following the composition of Zechariah but preceding that of Ezra and Nehemiah.³¹ The other end of the spectrum of scholarly opinion makes Esther a Hasmonean composition, its violent and vengeful ninth chapter especially fitting for an age of open war between worshippers of Yahweh and their pagan enemies. Llewellyn-Jones, a strong advocate for a Persian-period composition, nonetheless argues that chapter nine is a Hasmonean addition, and that the story originally ended simply with Mordecai's triumph over Haman.³² Some scholars argue for a Hellenistic date based on the notion that much in Esther is derived from

30. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, 139. The book arrived in the fourth year of Ptolemy and Cleopatra. It is possible that this Ptolemy is Ptolemy VIII Soter, in which case the date would be 114 BC. The latest Ptolemy it could be is Ptolemy XII Auletos, whose fourth year on the throne would have been 73 BC.

31. Albert D. Friedberg, "A New Clue in the Dating of the Composition of the Book of Esther," *Vetus Testamentum* 50, no. 4 (2000): 561–65. See David Talshir and Zipora Talshir, "The Double Month Naming in Late Biblical Books: A New Clue for Dating Esther?" *Vetus Testamentum* 54, no. 4 (2004): 549–55, for a rebuttal to Friedberg's claims.

32. Llewellyn-Jones, *Ancient Persia and the Book of Esther*, 4–11.

Greek literature. Brosius, for example, suggests that the Esther story was based in part on Herodotus' account of Xerxes and Masistes' wife and assigns it a third century BC date.³³ Johnson counters that similarities between Greek and biblical literature in this period do not prove the latter's dependence on the former.³⁴ Ego argues that Mordecai's refusal to perform *proskynesis* to Haman points to a Hellenistic composition, after *proskynesis* famously became an issue in the time of Alexander the Great and when Hellenistic god-kingship became a problem for worshippers of Yahweh. He also argues for a pre-Maccabean composition on the grounds that Esther's incorporation of Judahites into the Gentile world and lack of focus on the Torah would have been incompatible with a Maccabean date.³⁵ This diversity of opinions and arguments is merely a sample and by no means exhaustive or representative. Those who regard Esther as canonical Scripture³⁶ might naturally lean toward an earlier date, but this is by no means required; after all, an inspired text does not need to be contemporary to be historically accurate. The book itself gives no indication regarding its author or date, so it seems best to remain agnostic.

The genre of the Esther story is even more problematic. Whereas those who hold to Esther's canonicity tend to argue that it presents genuine history, scholars not committed to its

33. Brosius, *Women in Ancient Persia*, 144. Llewellyn-Jones counters that there is no reason to privilege Herodotus this way (*Ancient Persia and the Book of Esther*, 8).

34. Sara R. Johnson, "Novelistic Elements in Esther: Persian or Hellenistic, Jewish or Greek?," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 67 (2005): 571–89.

35. Beate Ego, "The Book of Esther: A Hellenistic Book," *Journal of Ancient Judaism* 1, no. 3 (2010): 279–302.

36. The question of Esther's canonicity is not one this paper aims to address, but the reader should be aware that its inclusion in the canon has been debated throughout history. For an overview of the Lutheran understanding of the canon, and of Esther's place in it specifically, see Joel D. Fredrich, "Luther and the Biblical Canon," in *Reformation 500: The Enduring Relevance of the Lutheran Reformation* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2016), 47–72.

status as canonical Scripture overwhelmingly reject such a characterization. Fox notes, “If the [Esther] Scroll were not canonical, it is hard to imagine scholars arguing for its historicity, or even its ‘historical core,’ any more than they now insist that Judith or Tobit were written in the ages they tell about or that they record actual events.”³⁷ As briefly noted in the introduction, scholars identify several major and minor details that lead us away from identifying Esther as history. They point to contradictions with known history (Xerxes is in Susa when he should have been on his Greek campaign; the 127 provinces do not match the twenty to thirty known from outside sources [see footnote 3]; the total absence of Xerxes’ consort Amestris), implausibilities (the Persian king’s inability to rescind his edicts; an obscure Judahite girl becoming queen; the order to exterminate an entire people in an otherwise generally tolerant empire), and exaggerations (Haman’s enormous impalement pole; the number of people massacred when the Jews defend themselves).

Although many scholars agree on the unlikelihood of these details, they disagree on how exactly we should characterize the Esther story in light of them. Fox lists several prominent options: wisdom literature, Persian chronicle, historical novella or romance, diaspora story, history, festival etiology, and festival lection.³⁸ It is outside the scope of this paper to examine all the proposed options in detail. A few comments will suffice.

Scholars disagree both about what genre the book of Esther actually is and how its author intended it to be received. For Fox, Esther’s author “almost certainly meant us to read the book as a precise report of actual historical events,”³⁹ although Fox himself views the book as clearly a

37. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, 134.

38. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, 141–52.

39. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, 138.

work of fiction. Llewellyn-Jones notes that the author “presents his work as if it were history, although the story itself is much more at home in the genre of the historical novella.”⁴⁰ Weiland defends Esther’s historical reliability by noting several markers of historical narrative: the use of *waw*-consecutives, chronological references, and the invitation to search corroborating historical records. Even so, he recognizes that the book is written in “a highly dramatic fashion.”⁴¹ Johnson, meanwhile, has argued that the author placed historical details in his account that were obviously inaccurate, and that his original audience would have immediately picked up on this and recognized the book as historical fiction.⁴² There exist a myriad of other interpretations of Esther’s genre, but these examples provide a good sample.

As noted in the introduction, the operating assumption of this paper is that the Esther account is real history. Nevertheless, the question of genre is still important even with this assumption. We must ask what degree of narrative liberty the author permitted himself in how he told this story. Is it possible, for example, that what “really happened” was the regular fall of a favorite (Vashti) and rise of a new favorite (Esther) within the Persian harem, which the author has portrayed as a one-for-one “queen swap” for the sake of narrative drama? If we presume the story of Esther to be real history, such a possibility merits consideration.

40. Llewellyn-Jones, *Ancient Persia and the Book of Esther*, 5.

41. Weiland, “Historicity, Genre, and Narrative Design in the Book of Esther,” 153.

42. Johnson, “Novelistic Elements in Esther: Persian or Hellenistic, Jewish or Greek?” 586.

VASHTI, ESTHER, AND AMESTRIS

Perhaps the biggest problem in situating Esther in her historical context is that we know the name of Xerxes' wife, and her name was not Esther. Rather, it was Amestris, who appears three times in Herodotus' *Histories*: the first is a passing mention in the catalogue of units in Xerxes' invasion army, where the commander of the Persian division is Otanes, father of Amestris, the wife of Xerxes;⁴³ in the second, Herodotus reports a rumor that Amestris buried fourteen Persian children alive as an offering for her own life;⁴⁴ and the third is the infamous story of Masistes' wife.⁴⁵ The last mention is the most substantial. Herodotus records how Xerxes, returning from Greece to Sardis, fell in love with the unnamed wife of his brother Masistes. Failing to win her heart, he plotted to marry her daughter Artaynte to his own son Darius, believing he could draw her closer to himself in the process. The wedding took place, but when he returned to Susa, Xerxes lost his affection for Masistes' wife and became smitten with her daughter Artaynte instead, now his daughter-in-law. Meanwhile Xerxes' wife Amestris wove him a fabulous robe. Xerxes foolishly promised his lover Artaynte anything she wanted, and when she demanded the

43. Hdt. 7.61. Hubbard (Robert L. Hubbard Jr., "Vashti, Amestris and Esther 1,9," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 119 [2007]: 259–271) has attempted to argue on the basis of Herodotus' standard name formula that this is not actually a reference to Xerxes' wife Amestris, but rather that Herodotus' Amestris is actually the corrupted name of Otanes' father, and that the passage should read as "Otanēs son of [original male name that has become *Amestris*], the father of Xerxes' [unnamed] wife" (260–266). This seems unlikely. Ctesias (F13) gives the name Onaphas for Amestris' father.

44. Hdt. 7.114.

45. Hdt. 9.109–113.

robe, the king could not refuse her. Amestris discovered this and was livid, not with Artaynte, but with her unnamed mother, the wife of Masistes. At a banquet, when Amestris was offered anything *she* wanted, she demanded Xerxes hand over Masistes' wife to her, whom she promptly mutilated. Thus the picture we receive from Herodotus of Xerxes' consort is one of exceeding jealousy and cruelty. Ctesias (F14, quoted by Photius⁴⁶) also records how, during the reign of Artaxerxes, Amestris impaled the rebel commander Inarus on three stakes and beheaded fifty other Greeks in retaliation for their killing of her son Achaemenides in battle.

Scholars who attempt to demonstrate Esther's historicity have sought to link either Vashti or Esther with Amestris. Shea argues for the former association based on several points. He notes that the two names are not impossible to link on linguistic grounds (though a link is certainly not provable). The chronology also fits: Vashti/Amestris refused to come before Xerxes at his pre-Greek invasion banquet and was deposed from her position as *chief* wife (but not deposed as a wife entirely). Having fallen from favor, she was not permitted to accompany Xerxes during the invasion, which accounts for her absence from Herodotus' narrative in that period, nor was she in Sardis when Xerxes returned from Greece and fell in love with Masistes' wife. Only when Xerxes returned to Susa did Vashti/Amestris reappear on the scene, presenting the robe as an attempt to re-ingratiate herself with the king, but the unfortunate turn of events and her cruelty toward Masistes' wife prompted Xerxes to finally do what he had decided to do four years earlier and find a replacement for her. Esther thus became Xerxes' chief wife in the years following the invasion of Greece, about which we know almost nothing from extrabiblical sources. Although fallen from favor, Vashti/Amestris never disappeared and reclaimed her position of influence

46. Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones and James Robson, *Ctesias' History of Persia: Tales of the Orient* (London/New York: Routledge, 2010), 188–89.

when Xerxes died and her son Artaxerxes succeeded to the throne.⁴⁷ Yamauchi seems to agree with Shea's interpretation.⁴⁸

This identification is not impossible, but it is far from certain and requires us to stretch the details in the book of Esther. We would need to imagine that Xerxes' order to depose Vashti was not immediately obeyed, and indeed that Vashti/Amestris was still relatively prominent in his harem when he returned from Greece in 479 BC. We would also have to conclude that a wife who was so publicly humiliated in her deposition from power would manage to claw her way back to prominence at the end of Xerxes' reign, and that this went entirely unmentioned by our ancient sources. This seems highly unlikely.

The other option is to identify Amestris with Esther herself. Gordis has argued that it is possible to link the two names,⁴⁹ but as with Vashti this is far from certain. There are several problems with equating Esther and Amestris. First, as Fox notes, Amestris bore Xerxes a son in 483 BC, several years before Esther joined his harem.⁵⁰ Gertoux has attempted to solve this discrepancy through two major chronological alterations: he places the beginning of Xerxes' reign in 496 BC, not the conventional 486 BC at the death of Darius I, allowing for a decade-long co-regency; and he reinterprets a passage in Plutarch's *Artaxerxes* to have Artaxerxes (Xerxes' heir) born in 485 BC, pushing Amestris' marriage date back to 489 BC, the seventh

47. William H. Shea, "Esther and History," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 14, no. 1 (1976): 235–42.

48. Edwin M. Yamauchi, *Persia and the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1990), 230–232.

49. Robert Gordis, "Religion, Wisdom, and History in the Book of Esther: A New Solution to an Ancient Crux," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 100 (1981): 384–85.

50. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, 136.

year of Xerxes' reign.⁵¹ This would mean Amestris and Esther both married Xerxes the same year, implying they are the same person. While creative, Gertoux's explanation is a longshot and requires a complete reworking of Achaemenid chronology. The chronological discrepancy still appears an insurmountable obstacle to linking Esther with Amestris.

Another problem is the characterization of Amestris by Herodotus. Few defenders of Esther's historicity are eager to accept Herodotus' testimony that Amestris/Esther buried fourteen children alive and mutilated a rival, or Ctesias' report of her impaling and beheading fifty Greeks. But this is not as problematic as the chronological issue. For one, we have good reason to be suspicious about Herodotus' characterization of Amestris. His report that she buried alive fourteen children of Persian nobles may very well be a mere rumor. The Masistes story, too, ought to give us pause, given how well it fits into Herodotus' overall goal of demonstrating the contrasts between Greeks and Persians and the pitfalls of despotism (which Herodotus himself spells out in a fictional speech he puts into the mouth of Otanes).⁵² One can read the story as an indictment of monarchy: the reckless sexual passions of an absolute ruler, the squabbling between competing lovers, the absurd rule that the king must consent to any formal request made at a royal banquet, and the vengeful cruelty of a royal woman against her rival. Hubbard notes that the story has all the marks of a novella and adds that it is difficult to date the incident, given how suddenly it appears in Herodotus' narrative.⁵³ Of course, none of this proves the stories are *untrue*, only that we ought to be cautious before accepting them uncritically.

51. Gerard Gertoux, *Queen Esther Wife of Xerxes: Chronological, Historical and Archaeological Evidence* (Lulu, 2017), 14, 25.

52. Hdt. 3:80. Debra Hamel, *Reading Herodotus: A Guided Tour through the Wild Boars, Dancing Suitors, and Crazy Tyrants of The History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), 286.

53. Hubbard, "Vashti, Amestris, and Esther 1,9," 269.

Then there is the other solution: to consider that Esther *did* do these things that Herodotus and Ctesias report. As much as we may seek to avoid imagining Esther as anything other than the sweet, gentle maiden of Sunday school stories, the book of Esther itself does not obviously depict her as such. Indeed, her request in 9:13 for Haman's sons to be impaled and for the Judahites of Susa to be granted an extra day to massacre three hundred more enemies depicts a woman with at the very least a thick spine. That Yahweh used someone to accomplish his purpose does not inherently make that individual absolutely virtuous. If one were to accept Gertoux's adjusted chronology, the characterization of Amestris would not be sufficient to rule out an Esther/Amestris identification. That being said, the chronological problem is still too big an obstacle, and Gertoux's explanation is too stretched to provide any confidence in linking Esther with Amestris.

The final problem with an Amestris/Esther link is that Herodotus and Ctesias both provide us with names for her father and, though they disagree on the exact name, they prove that Amestris did not come from a Judahite family. This argues strongly against identifying Esther with Amestris. Vashti, whose ethnicity is unknown, presents less of a problem in this regard.

In summary, while arguments can be made to link Vashti or Esther with Amestris, neither can by any means be proven and both require significant reworking of the details in the Esther story or the extrabiblical sources. If one were forced to link either of the characters with Amestris, Vashti would probably be the more natural choice. For now, however, both possibilities appear unconvincing.

BIBLICAL, PERSIAN, AND GREEK TITLES FOR ROYAL WOMEN

Perhaps the most important detail in the Esther story that pertains to the heroine's specific role at Xerxes' court is that she is called queen, מַלְכָּה. Determining her position requires understanding exactly what this term does and does not mean. Does מַלְכָּה refer to a single reigning Persian queen occupying an official royal position, or can it be understood more broadly to refer to royal women or women in the king's orbit in general? In this section, I will analyze the terms used to describe royal women in biblical Hebrew, in our Persian sources, and in the classical Greek authors.

Biblical Titles for Royal Women

The Hebrew word מַלְכָּה, applied to Esther to mark her as “queen,” is rather rare in the Bible. In fact, apart from a single other reference, it occurs only in the context of the Esther story and the accounts of the Queen of Sheba (1 Kings 10 and 2 Chronicles 9).⁵⁴ No Israelite or Judahite woman is given the title, though Solvang warns that we should not make too much of this absence, since other members of the Davidic royal family also “receive no consistent designation.”⁵⁵

54. This does not include the occurrences of the construct מַלְכָּת, always used to refer to a goddess, the “queen of heaven;” see Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament, with an Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic, based on the Lexicon of Wilhelm Gesenius* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1907), 521, s.v. “מַלְכָּה” and “מַלְכָּת.”

55. Elna Solvang, *A Woman's Place is in the House: Royal Women of Judah and their Involvement in the House of David* (New York / London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003), 72–73.

Unfortunately, the Queen of Sheba episode helps us very little in understanding what exactly a מְלָכָה was to a fifth-century Hebrew speaker. Though legends and retellings of her story abound in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim tradition, we know almost nothing historically about this enigmatic queen, or even the precise location of her country.⁵⁶ The biblical account provides little that would help us understand her royal position relative to that of the king or other royal women. The Queen of Sheba, therefore, does not give us any hints as to how contemporary Judahites understood Esther to be a queen.

The only other use of מְלָכָה in the Bible occurs in Song of Songs 6:8, 9. The man says of his beloved, “Sixty queens there may be, and eighty concubines, and virgins beyond number; but my dove, my perfect one, is unique, the only daughter of her mother, the favorite of the one who bore her. The young women saw her and called her blessed; the queens and concubines praised her” (NIV). We should not stretch the relevance of this poetic verse too far, but there are several noteworthy details that may help us form a picture of royal women in the Davidic monarchy. However, these conclusions are only relevant if we assume that all the women described in this verse belong to the speaker as members of his own harem and not to other men.⁵⁷ If we make this assumption, it is noteworthy that not only are there multiple queens, but *sixty* of them. While the poetic nature of the verse would allow us to interpret this as hyperbole, it can at least be said that מְלָכָה here does not appear to refer to a single chief female who reigns alongside the king. Second, the queens are contrasted with the concubines (פִּילִגְשִׁימִים) and other young women (עַלְמֹת). There is clearly some sort of distinction between classes of women here, perhaps along the lines of a) legally wedded wives, b) non-legally wedded concubines, and c) young women who may potentially become a) or b). The point here is that “queens” is not being used to refer to

56. For one possibility regarding the identification of the land of Sheba, see Patrick Anani Etoughe, “The Land of the Queen of Sheba,” *Valley View University Journal of Theology* 4 (2017): 1–9.

57. Maintaining monogamy as the biblical standard for marriage would perhaps encourage interpreting this as a reference to women belonging to other men, not members of the speaker’s harem. Given the attribution of this poem to Solomon, however, we should consider the possibility that it is indeed a reference to the many women of his harem.

all the royal women in general, but to a particularly important class of royal women. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the man in these verses speaks of his beloved as preeminent among all the queens, concubines and virgins, and even receiving praise from them (6:9). While again we must not draw too strong a conclusion, a possible reading here seems to be that while the king has many women of various classes in his harem, a single woman stands out as most prominent because she is his favorite, not because she has a higher official rank. We are not told what rank the beloved holds, only that she is loved the most. It is affection alone that gives her the most prominent position.

Song of Songs is set during the reign of Solomon and therefore precedes the events in Esther by several centuries. Nonetheless, it is important that we explore how a Judahite in the fifth century BC would have understood the concept of queenship and the status of royal women from his own background, as this would naturally color his understanding of Persian royal women. There is nothing in the Bible that would lead us to conclude that the Davidic monarchy maintained anything like an official “queen” position, and some evidence to the contrary. David had multiple wives and concubines (2 Sam. 5:13; 16:22; 1 Chron. 14:3) with none identified as a chief queen. Solomon infamously “had seven hundred wives of royal birth and three hundred concubines” from various nations (1 Kgs 11:3, NIV). The word מַלְכִּיָּהּ, translated here as “of royal birth,” should not be taken to mean exclusively from a king’s family, for the same word is used in Esther to describe the wives of the Persian nobles (1:18). The contrast here, as Maier points out, is between “first rank” and “second rank” wives.⁵⁸

Perhaps the most famous royal woman in the monarchy of Israel, Ahab’s wife Jezebel, is never referred to as מַלְכִּיָּהּ. While she clearly has influence over her husband, final and official authority always rested with Ahab himself (1 Kgs 21:8).⁵⁹ We also do not know how many other wives Ahab had or how they compared in influence to Jezebel. He certainly was not

58. Walter A. Maier III, *1 Kings 1–11: ConcC* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2018), 870.

59. Maier summarizes in another context, “[Ahab], not Jezebel, was also the king, and he called the shots.” See Walter A. Maier III, *1 Kings 12–22: ConcC* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2019), 1349.

monogamous, since he had seventy sons. We should not conclude that Jezebel was necessarily the most prominent among Ahab's wives in general because she features most prominently in the narrative of 1 Kings. Rather, it is obvious that she features so prominently in the narrative because of her fanatical loyalty to the cult of Baal.

There is one woman in the monarchy of Judah who is described as reigning. Athaliah, mother of Ahaziah, usurped the throne of Judah and ruled (מֶלֶכָה) after the death of her son (2 Kgs 11:1–3; 2 Chr 22:10–12). Although she had been married to King Jehoram, Athaliah achieves power not as queen, but as queen mother. She is able to usurp the throne even though Ahaziah was married, overpowering or bypassing any wife/wives Ahaziah might have had. It appears that the king's mother tended to be more influential at the Israelite or Judahite court than his wives. The Bible includes several examples. Solomon set up a throne for his mother Bathsheba, not for any of his wives, to sit upon beside him (1 Kgs 2:19). More significantly, Asa deposed his grandmother Maacah from her position as queen mother (גְּבִירָה) because she had made an image of Asherah (1 Kgs 15:13; 1 Chr 15:16). Obviously, he could not depose her from the biological fact that she was his grandmother, but he *could* depose her from the position she held as גְּבִירָה.⁶⁰ In Jeremiah 13:18 the גְּבִירָה is described as losing her crown along with the king, and in 29:2 she is listed among the royal court of Jehoiachin that was taken into exile, while no reference is made to any royal wives bearing the title מֶלֶכָה. It is noteworthy that the author of Esther never employs גְּבִירָה to refer to either Esther or Vashti.

In conclusion, we can recognize the existence of “classes” of royal women in the monarchies of Israel and Judah, namely wives and concubines. There is no explicit indication in the biblical text that any wife or romantic partner of a king was ever recognized as a chief queen. Rather it is the king's mother who tends to appear more influential, although this could be simply

60. Note that גְּבִירָה does not always exclusively refer to the queen mother. It can refer to a queen or royal lady (1 Kgs 11:19) to the mistress of a household (Gen 16:4, 8, 9; 2 Kgs 5:3; Ps 123:2; Prov 30:23) or it can be used figuratively to refer to a city ruling over other nations (Isa 24:2). See BDB, 153, s.v. גְּבִירָה.

the nature of the relationship: a king could have many (seven hundred!) wives, but he could obviously only ever have one mother.

What does this mean for Esther? While the positions of royal women in Israel and Judah were not identical to those in Persia, they do provide us with a framework through which fifth-century BC Judahites living in Susa may have thought about women and monarchy. By employing the term מְלָכָה, it seems far from certain that a Judahite author was making the claim that the woman bearing the title was the single queen in an official and unique capacity. Rather, it seems possible that a מְלָכָה was generally a wife of a king, and perhaps more specifically a “first class” wife. But that did not necessarily make her the *sole* or *primary* wife.

It is of course possible that the author of Esther employs the rare term מְלָכָה precisely because he seeks to describe a position of chief reigning female that did not exist in the Davidic monarchy. But we cannot prove this from the little we know about what a Judahite understood when he heard the word.

Persian Titles for Royal Women

As mentioned in the introduction, I have not studied Old Persian or Elamite and therefore cannot evaluate Persian titles for royal women myself. The work of Maria Brosius and Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones is very helpful on this topic. In this section, I merely summarize their conclusions.⁶¹

There are two terms for royal women in the Persepolis tablets: *irti*, and *dukšiš*.⁶² The former always occurs with a third person masculine singular possessive pronoun, designating a

61. Brosius, *Women in Ancient Persia*, 14–34. Brosius’ chapter analyzes titles for the king’s mother, wife/wives, daughter(s), and concubines. Due to the scope of this paper, I have summarized only her conclusions about the wife/wives and concubines. Also see Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones, *King and Court in Ancient Persia: 559 to 331 BCE* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 109–11.

62. Brosius, *Women in Ancient Persia*, 25. A third term for women, *mutu*, was applied only to ordinary women.

woman who belongs to a man. Brosius therefore concludes that we can rightly translate *irti* as “wife.” It can be applied to royal as well as ordinary women and simply indicates marital status. *Dukšiš*, on the other hand, seems to have been applied to women who belonged to the royal family.⁶³ The term *ša ekalli* appears in Neo-Babylonian documents of the Achaemenid period and appears to refer to royal Persian women. Brosius suggests that this may be a term for the king’s wife, though it is not absolutely clear whether or not it could have a wider scope; a more inclusive translation would be “woman of the palace.”⁶⁴ Llewellyn-Jones suggests that concubines may have been included under the title *ša ekalli* but were unlikely to receive the title of *dukšiš*.⁶⁵ There seems to have been no definitive term used to refer to a chief wife or queen. References to women as wives of the king do not help us determine whether any particular wife was elevated above the others to an official position of queen.

Greek Titles for Royal Women

Βασίλεια and βασίλισσα are the Greek words used to refer to royal females. Neither title was used exclusively to refer to a single queen. Brosius notes that the latter was used in the Hellenistic period in reference to royal daughters as well as wives.⁶⁶ Βασίλεια is used by Herodotus to refer to various non-Persian women who were not reigning queens.⁶⁷ Although in a Persian context Herodotus uses it to refer to the king’s wife, the term is also used in Aeschylus’

63. Brosius, *Women in Ancient Persia*, 28.

64. Brosius, *Women in Ancient Persia*, 28–29.

65. Llewellyn-Jones, *King and Court in Ancient Persia*, 110.

66. Brosius, *Women in Ancient Persia*, 20.

67. Hdt. 1.11.2, 4.127.4. See Brosius, *Women in Ancient Persia*, 20.

Persians to refer to the queen mother.⁶⁸ Brosius summarizes: “What is clear now is that βασίλεια was simply a Greek term used to identify certain women as members of a royal court or ruling house. The translation ‘queen’, which would appear to identify one particular royal woman as holding a very specific political status, cannot be justified.”⁶⁹

68. Aeschylus, *Persians*, 153–54.

69. Brosius, *Women in Ancient Persia*, 20.

ROYAL FEMALE POSITIONS AT THE ACHAEMENID COURT

Like royal women in the Davidic monarchy, women at the Persian court fell into a variety of categories. The king's female orbit included his mother, wives, sisters, daughters, concubines, and palace servants. Esther would have been either a wife or a concubine of Xerxes, and so those are the two categories I analyze here. In this section, I examine the ancient evidence for how wives and concubines are characterized and how they differed from each other. In the following section, I apply these findings to the Esther story to determine in which category Esther most likely fits.

Legal Wives

The distinction between Persian wives and concubines is not abundantly clear. Greek authors tended to portray the Great King's harem as consisting of a single named wife and numerous concubines, but this picture seems misleading. For one, Persian kings seem to have been polygamous. While we don't have numerous named wives for each Persian king, the example of Darius I marrying all available females associated with his predecessors demonstrates that at the very least they *could* have many wives (although we should use Darius cautiously, since his unique position in the Persian line of succession made his marriages somewhat unique; see Brosius for a fuller discussion⁷⁰). Lenfant points out that the first four Persian kings were clearly

70. Brosius, *Women in Ancient Persia*, 47–64, 68.

polygamous, while Xerxes and those who followed him are never described with more than one wife (with the possible exception of Artaxerxes II, as it is unclear if he married several of his daughters simultaneously or in succession).⁷¹ Lenfant says that Herodotus alone portrays Persian kings as polygamous, while other Greek authors tend to speak of them as having one wife and many concubines.⁷² Herodotus goes so far as to say that Persian men in general had a number of wives and more concubines, though this may be an overstatement.⁷³ The clear presence of polygamy among the early kings, combined with the lack of details in our sources and the prevalence of polygamy in adjacent Near Eastern cultures, seems to suggest that Persian kings certainly *could* have multiple legitimate wives and more concubines, and probably often (or perhaps always) *did*. As Llewellyn-Jones notes, polygamy was a common practice in monarchies of the ancient Near East because of the king's desire to produce as many heirs as possible.⁷⁴ This justification for Persian polygamy is also noted by the Greek writer Strabo, who says that the Persians, "marry many wives and support at the same time more concubines in order to have many children."⁷⁵ That the Greeks, writing with their own cultural assumptions, failed to mention the many wives of each king is not enough to prove that those kings were monogamous. Lenfant's caution that the mention of several wives does not necessarily mean marriage to several wives at once (as opposed to in succession) is warranted, but also not a strong argument

71. Lenfant, "Polygamy in Greek Views of Persians," 22.

72. Lenfant, "Polygamy in Greek Views of Persians," 23.

73. Hdt. 1.135. As Lenfant points out ("Polygamy in Greek Views of Persians," 21–22), however, Greek sources only ever give examples of Persian kings having multiple wives, not Persian men in general. She therefore suggests that "if we consider Greek views in general, we should speak not of Persian polygamy, but rather of Persian royal polygamy."

74. Llewellyn-Jones, *King and Court in Ancient Persia*, 114.

75. Strabo 15.3.17, quoted and translated in Lenfant, "Polygamy in Greek Views of Persians," 27. Lenfant notes caution, however, in applying this description to Persian kings specifically.

against their being polygamous;⁷⁶ it is just as possible that these wives *were* all married at the same time. It therefore seems best to operate on the assumption that Persian kings generally had multiple legal wives. If a king could have multiple wives, we must then ask two questions: where did he acquire these wives, and did he select one of them as a chief wife or “queen”?

Several pieces of evidence seem to suggest that a Persian king’s wives had to come from the royal family itself or from other noble Persian families. This would make the primary distinction between wives and concubines a matter of ethnicity: Persians became wives, foreigners became concubines. Herodotus reports that the Persian king had to choose his wife/wives not just from any noble Persian family, but specifically from the seven families that had conspired with Darius I to overthrow Gaumata.⁷⁷ This passage has been used to rule out the possibility of Esther becoming Xerxes’ wife, but a closer look would lead us to conclude that Herodotus was simply mistaken here. As Brosius points out, such an agreement would make little sense since it would not privilege all seven families, but only the family (or families) from which the king selected a bride.⁷⁸ Second, the very king who supposedly ratified this agreement, Darius I, did not follow it. We have no record of Darius marrying any member of a noble family following his accession to the throne, though he was married to the daughter of a nobleman named Gobryas before this agreement was ratified. Brosius summarizes, “This does not leave much credibility to the rule of the nobles unless it can be shown that it was followed by Darius’ successors as a binding law.”⁷⁹ Such proof is lacking given how little we know about later wives.

76. Lenfant, “Polygamy in Greek Views of Persians,” 22, 36–37.

77. Hdt. 3.84.2

78. Brosius, *Women in Ancient Persia*, 51.

79. Brosius, *Women in Ancient Persia*, 51. Brosius argues that Darius’ marriages demonstrate a privileged position for a couple conspirators, not all seven in some sort of general policy.

Another piece of evidence suggests that the king's wives were at least Persian and not foreigners, even if it makes no claim about the seven families. Herodotus records that when Cambyses demanded the daughter of Amasis, king of Egypt, Amasis refused because he knew his daughter would be treated as a concubine rather than a wife.⁸⁰ One can hardly imagine a more prominent or noble foreign woman than the daughter of an Egyptian king, so if even Amasis' daughter would be made a concubine, surely the distinction between wife and concubine had to be one of ethnicity. If we must make a firm distinction between wives and concubines, this would be the most natural division. It is supported by Herodotus' assertion in the same account that the son of a concubine could not become heir to the throne unless there existed no son from a legal wife.

On the other hand, there are several examples that suggest non-Persians could indeed be legal wives. Justin claims that Artaxerxes II married (*in matrimonium receperat*) Aspasia, a Greek concubine (see more on Aspasia below).⁸¹ Stoneman allows for Aspasia's status as a wife, saying Artaxerxes "went so far as to make her his 'senior wife', a remarkable honour for a non-native Persian."⁸² We should treat Aspasia's example with caution. Justin's account is very late and therefore not supremely reliable for carefully defining Achaemenid marriage customs, and it is possible that Greek authors may have exaggerated Aspasia's status at the Persian court.

Another potential example is Alexander III of Macedon (the Great). Though not Persian, Alexander obviously took steps to present himself as a legitimate Great King following his

80. Hdt. 3.1.2.

81. Justin, *Epitome of Pompeius Trogus' Philippic History*, 10.2.

82. Richard Stoneman, *Xerxes: A Persian Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 183.

conquest of Persia:⁸³ he likely invented a story in which the dying Darius III appointed him heir of the empire, giving him the right to hunt down the “usurper” Bessus;⁸⁴ he attempted to institute Persian-style *proskynesis* at his court;⁸⁵ and at Susa he married two royal Persian wives and gave many other noble Persians to his Macedonian officers.⁸⁶ One of the most fascinating and bizarre decisions Alexander made as the new Great King, however, was to take as his first legitimate wife a Sogdian warlord’s daughter named Roxane. Securing the submission of the Sogdian peoples through such a marriage made practical sense,⁸⁷ but it is difficult to see how Alexander’s marriage to Roxane would have fit in either a Macedonian or Persian context. Regarding his Macedonian context, Alexander did not follow the example of his father Philip who married seven women to achieve his military and diplomatic aims; Alexander never took a Macedonian bride, did not marry to secure alliances with any Balkan or Anatolian peoples,⁸⁸ and took no Persian bride until much later at the Susa weddings (although he did have a Persian mistress named Barsine and may have slept with Darius III’s wife after capturing her at the Battle of Issus). As the new Great King, Alexander may have been expected to marry all the available

83. Llewellyn-Jones states that he “enthusiastically embraced important Achaemenid court rituals and structures” (*King and Court in Ancient Persia*, 9).

84. Quintus Curtius Rufus 5.13.22-25 and Justin, *Epitome of Pompeius Trogus’ Philippic History*, 11.15. Both describe Darius III entrusting a message for Alexander to a Macedonian soldier in which Darius praises Alexander’s character, cedes the empire to Alexander’s control, and exhorts Alexander to take vengeance on his murderers. That this is likely myth is obvious; who propagated it is a more difficult question. It is possible that such a myth goes back to Alexander himself, though there is no way to confirm this.

85. Arrian 4.9–11; Plutarch, *Alexander*, 45.1, 54.3–55.1; Quintus Curtius Rufus 8.5.

86. Arrian 7.4; Plutarch, *Alexander*, 70.3; Quintus Curtius Rufus 9.2–5; Diodorus 17.107.6.

87. Peter Green, *Alexander of Macedon, 356–323 B.C.: A Historical Biography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 369. Securing the alliance of Roxane’s father Oxyartes was very helpful for Alexander as he attempted to subjugate the remaining Sogdians.

88. He did famously offer to marry into the family of Pixodarus when he was crown prince, but not when he became king.

women from Darius III's family much as Darius I had done a century and a half earlier. Yet he chose not to marry until he wed Roxane, a non-Persian, in 327 BC, several years after becoming *de facto* Great King of Persia. Such a move certainly helped him pragmatically among the Sogdians but must also have risked offending both Macedonians and Persians alike.⁸⁹ The latter are more our concern here. If Persian kings only married Persians and not foreigners, then Alexander was taking a major step to *not* portray himself as a Persian king when he married Roxane. On the other hand, if Persian kings could and did marry foreign women as legal wives, then Alexander's marriage to Roxane made perfect pragmatic sense. This perhaps suggests that it was not out of the ordinary for Persian kings to marry foreigners as legal wives.

But we must not look only to pragmatic or political reasons for Alexander's marriage. The ancient sources are united in speaking of the wedding to Roxane as first and foremost a romance: Alexander was simply infatuated with Roxane's beauty.⁹⁰ Some modern scholars draw the same conclusion. MacLean Rogers says,

The purely political or pragmatic explanation for Alexander's first marriage is not persuasive. Alexander certainly could have married any Macedonian, Greek, or Persian woman (or women) he had met before or after 336. Marriage to any one or more of these women might have brought greater political benefits at times when Alexander's prospects were far less secure.... The simple explanation here is most convincing: this was a love match.⁹¹

If love was indeed Alexander's primary motivation for marrying Roxane, and if he married her knowing it would not be offensive to Persians (or at least not so offensive as to be dangerous),

89. That some Macedonians were offended is noted by Quintus Curtius Rufus, 8.4.30.

90. Arrian, *Anabasis*, 4.19.5. Quintus Curtius Rufus 8.4.25. Plutarch, *Alexander*, 47.7–8.

91. Guy MacLean Rogers, *Alexander: The Ambiguity of Greatness* (New York: Random House, 2004), 172–73.

then we can possibly conclude that such behavior was acceptable for a Persian monarch or at least not totally taboo. Politics and regular customs aside, perhaps the Great King could marry whomever he desired for whatever reason. We must not push the example of Alexander too far and make it anything like a conclusive argument, but it merits consideration.

A final argument against the ethnic requirement for legal wives is that non-Persians could bear the heir to the throne. Darius II's mother was a Babylonian named Cosmartidene. However, Darius II ascended the throne because the only legitimate heir, Xerxes (not Esther's Xerxes), had died, so he is an exception.⁹² Nevertheless, as Kuhrt points out, the "crucial factor in eligibility for the throne was paternal descent, so that sons born by concubines could accede in the absence of 'legitimate' offspring."⁹³

In addressing this first question, then, no definitive answer is possible. If a distinction should be made between legal wives and concubines, it seems that the most natural distinction would be their ethnic status. That being said, this is largely an argument from silence: we simply don't know the number or names of most Persian kings' wives. Whether or not Esther, a non-Persian, could have been the legal wife of Xerxes cannot be determined with certainty from what we know about the rules for choosing a legal wife.

One factor, however, may lead us toward concluding Esther was not a legal wife: her ethnic identity was not only not Persian, but remained completely hidden from Xerxes until her banquet with Haman (2:10, 7:3-4). That a Persian king would take a legal bride whose ethnicity and origin he never bothered to learn seems very unlikely. Then again, we cannot rule out the

92. Brosius, *Women in Ancient Persia*, 33.

93. Kuhrt, *The Persian Empire: A Corpus of Sources from the Achaemenid Period*, 578.

possibility that a truly infatuated king might have made major exceptions to what were otherwise general rules.

As to whether a king elevated a chief wife or “queen” above the others, we also have very little information. Llewellyn-Jones notes that “in most historical periods the harem was headed by a chief queen, usually the king’s mother or, in her absence, the most favoured (or influential) wife, who gathered about her the other royal and noble women.”⁹⁴ What exactly qualified a wife as “favored” or “influential” is hard to say. Llewellyn-Jones elaborates in a later work:

It is difficult to know if a Persian king picked out a ‘chief’ wife – on par with the pharaonic Egyptian tradition of appointing a Great Royal wife ... who ranked higher than the other royal wives ... or whether precedence in the Achaemenid harem pecking-order was negotiated on a more ad hoc basis. There does not seem to have been an official Persian title for a ‘chief’ wife, which suggests that it was not a recognized court position. ... Within the female household of the royal palaces of the Near East, status was dependent upon gaining and maintaining the king’s favour.... Women who had an emotional or sexual hold on the king to this degree would have had (even if only temporarily) greater status than those who had no access to his heart or his bed, and therefore we can speculate how competition to attract and keep the king’s sexual attention could be intense. The title ‘favourite of the king’, found with intermittent regularity in the Near Eastern sources, suggests that some women – but not all women – were recognized as having a particular significance in the king’s affections. This, it seems, is true of both Esther and Vashti. Love and sexual attraction aside, in the cut and thrust world of the court, it is increasingly clear that the position of a primary or favoured wife was not necessarily a stable one given that the king’s affections might change, or rival candidates for his affection (perhaps championed by noble families) might arise and supplant his previous love. A king might show his preference for a particular woman by appointing her son as his heir. The new heir might be the son of a high-ranking consort, a lesser wife or of a concubine.⁹⁵

94. Llewellyn-Jones, *King and Court in Ancient Persia*, 109.

95. Llewellyn-Jones, *Ancient Persia and the Book of Esther*, 115–16.

This summary is the best that can be managed with the available evidence. It is noteworthy that the chief woman of the court need not necessarily be a legal wife. We have already seen the example of Aspasia who, even if not elevated to the position of “senior wife” as Stoneman described her, is nevertheless portrayed in our ancient sources as the favorite among the king’s female orbit. The other factor that seems to have elevated one woman above the rest is the production of an heir. Lenfant notes that when the Greeks speak of a single or chief wife, they seem always to be referring to the mother of the crown prince.⁹⁶

If such a position as chief wife existed, then, it was likely determined by a woman’s hold on the king’s affection and/or by the designation of her son as the crown prince. Both point to the Persian harem operating on something of an *ad hoc* basis. A son did not become the heir because he was born to the official queen; rather, a woman became the most prominent wife in the harem because she bore the son the king selected to succeed him. Likewise, a ranking system oriented around affection was prone to fluctuations. In any case, we cannot determine with any certainty that a chief wife was always or ever marked out as “queen.”

Concubines

If we can stand on little solid ground analyzing the legal wives of Persian kings, we are no better off when it comes to concubines. Brosius says, “Well-grounded evidence for Persian concubines remains rare, and even less well understood is their background and social status at the Persian court.”⁹⁷ She concludes that if we must make a distinction between wives and concubines, the

96. Lenfant, “Polygamy in Greek Views of Persians,” 26.

97. Brosius, *Women in Ancient Persia*, 32.

example of Amasis' daughter would lead us to conclude that wives were Persians and concubines non-Persians.⁹⁸

That concubines could be high-ranking is important to note. As Stoneman summarizes, "concubines were not to be confused with courtesans, prostitutes or mistresses, still less with 'dancing-girls' or other musical retainers."⁹⁹ The case of Amasis' daughter makes this clear. Another example outside the royal family is relevant here too. Xenophon records how the Persian satrap Spithridates was offended by another satrap, Pharnabazus, who desired to marry the king's daughter and take Spithridates' own daughter as a concubine (so offended, in fact, that Spithridates defected to the side of the enemy Spartan king Agesilaus).¹⁰⁰ What should we make of this account? It could prove that concubines could come even from noble Persian families (Pharnabazus' intent was not out of the norm and Spithridates' anger was simple jealousy) or it could prove the opposite (Pharnabazus' intent was entirely out of the norm and insulting to Spithridates). Stoneman seems to take it as the latter.¹⁰¹ Of course, this is not an example from the royal house itself, but it is close enough to be relevant to our discussion. Herodotus provides another example of a concubine who possibly came from a family of high social standing. When the allied Greek army defeated the Persians at Plataea, a Greek concubine named Coan, the daughter of Hegetorides from the island of Cos, escaped from her Persian captor and approached the Spartan general Pausanias for sanctuary. Pausanias assured her that he would protect her since her father Hegetorides was a close personal friend of his.¹⁰² It seems likely that Hegetorides

98. Brosius, *Women in Ancient Persia*, 32–33.

99. Stoneman, *Xerxes*, 187.

100. Xenophon, *Agesilaus*, 3.3.

101. Stoneman, *Xerxes*, 187.

102. Hdt. 9.76.

must have been a man of some standing to have such a relationship with the commander of the allied Greek army, and so Coan could be classified as a concubine from a (at least somewhat) prominent Greek family.

We have seen that, at least in exceptional circumstances, a concubine could bear the heir to the throne (Darius II). This is contrary to Herodotus' claim that no "bastard" could become king.¹⁰³ We also know that a non-Persian could become the king's favorite, whether she was technically a legal wife or a concubine. The story of Aspasia of Phocaea, mentioned briefly above, is relevant here. Aspasia was a Greek woman who became romantically involved with Cyrus the Younger, Artaxerxes II, and Darius II. Several ancient writers mention her. Xenophon makes only a passing reference to her, describing her as a clever and beautiful concubine.¹⁰⁴ Athenaeus mentions her briefly and also alludes to another concubine from Miletus kept by Cyrus at the same time.¹⁰⁵ Plutarch refers to Aspasia as Cyrus' favorite among all his concubines in two passages, one in his biography of Pericles (τὴν ἀγαπωμένην ὑπ' αὐτοῦ μάλιστα τῶν παλλακίδων; "the one he loved most among his concubines")¹⁰⁶ and the other in his biography of Artaxerxes (τὴν μάλιστα σπουδασθεῖσαν ὑπὸ Κύρου; "the most passionately loved by Cyrus").¹⁰⁷ In the latter passage Plutarch gives a brief account of how Aspasia caused a rift between Artaxerxes and Darius; he also refers to her as a concubine. Justin, as has already been quoted above, mentions that Artaxerxes not only took Aspasia as a concubine after his brother

103. Hdt. 3.2.

104. Xenophon, *Anabasis*, 1.10.2.

105. Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists*, 13.576.

106. Plutarch, *Pericles*, 24.7.

107. Plutarch, *Artaxerxes*, 26.3–27.3.

Cyrus was killed at the battle of Cunaxa, but actually married her (*in matrimonium receperat*).¹⁰⁸ Aelian provides the longest version of her story, describing how she was born to a free but poor family and was taken as plunder at the fall of her city. She was led into the presence of Cyrus along with other good-looking young women, but when Cyrus attempted to fondle her she resisted with tears. This made Cyrus love her even more and he took her as his favorite, and perhaps only, lover. Aelian notes that Aspasia was keen to show deference to the queen-mother Parysatis and do nothing to offend or upstage her. When Cyrus was killed at Cunaxa, Aspasia came into Artaxerxes' possession. She quickly gained his affection as well. At every step of the story, Aspasia remains exceedingly beautiful and irresistible to the Persians who encounter her, yet humble and inoffensive to a fault.¹⁰⁹

Before we apply the Aspasia story to our understanding of Persian concubines, it is important to note that the story may well be exaggerated. We have noted above how Justin's claim that Artaxerxes married Aspasia is very late and therefore highly suspect. Aelian, who gives us the most substantial account, is also very late in the second-third centuries AD. Aelian's account is also highly fictitious. He tells how Aspasia was miraculously healed of a lump under her chin in her youth and praises her appearance and character in highly exaggerated terms. That Aspasia existed and was indeed a prominent concubine of Cyrus the Younger and Artaxerxes II cannot be in doubt, given the mention by Xenophon, a reliable contemporary. Still, it is possible that Aspasia's story was exaggerated by the Greeks who loved the idea of one of their own captivating the Persian court and behaving with a dignity amidst the "barbarians."

108. Justin, *Epitome of Pompeius Trogus' Philippic History*, 10.2.

109. Aelian, *Varia Historia*, 12.1.

Nevertheless, we can glean some important information from the details of Aspasia's story. The first is that, in the wife/concubine distinction, she is clearly the latter. The Greek historians call her a concubine, she comes from a family of no distinction, she comes into the Persian court as a war captive, she is presented to Cyrus as one of many women for him to choose (much like Esther in the biblical narrative), and it is her character, appearance, and charm alone that win her the affection of the Persian royal men. That she was the chief woman at the courts she inhabited may possibly be Greek exaggeration, though Llewellyn-Jones is willing to call her Cyrus' "chief favourite" and "a concubine of the highest rank."¹¹⁰ Stoneman even goes so far as to call her Artaxerxes II's "senior wife", a remarkable honour for a non-native Persian,¹¹¹ and argues that the story is "not just a Greek interpretation of events, but reflects the way the Persians liked to regard their own amours."¹¹¹ That she was a very prominent woman at the courts seems indisputable. After all, she was important enough to drive a wedge between the Great King and the heir to the throne.

Such details are highly relevant to our understanding of Esther. Even if Esther were a concubine from no noteworthy background, it would be possible for her in such a role and rank to acquire the king's affection and be elevated to a role, if not a defined or official position, as his chief favorite. Her lack of noble Persian blood may have prevented her from being a legal wife, but not from becoming the most prominent woman in the king's orbit. Aspasia is a clear example of this. We therefore should not conclude that wives inherently enjoyed a closer relationship to the king than concubines, or that the latter were incapable of becoming prominent within the harem.

110. Llewellyn-Jones, *Ancient Persia and the Book of Esther*, 108.

111. Stoneman, *Xerxes*, 183.

If wives and concubines were not necessarily distinguished by their proximity to the king or the level of his affection they received, are there any noticeable differences between them besides ethnicity? One possible area of distinction regards royal dining customs. The Greek historians are divided as to which women were allowed in the king's presence during meals and when. Herodotus has Persian ambassadors to Macedonia explain their common practice of bringing in both wives and concubines together during the second half of a meal, the half where the wine flowed and the men got rowdy.¹¹² On the other hand, Plutarch contrasts wives and concubines at royal meals. He notes that the only women who regularly shared the king's table for the formal meal (the first half) were his mother and wife.¹¹³ He also describes how the wives depart after the first half and the concubines enter for the second:

When the Persian kings have their dinner, their lawful wives sit beside them during the dinner and eat with them. But when the kings want to divert themselves and indulge in drinking, they send them away and have music-girls and concubines come. And they are quite right to do so, as, in this way, they do not involve their wedded wives in their debaucheries and drunkenness.¹¹⁴

Heracleides of Cumae claims that generally the king took his meals alone, although sometimes his wife and sons dined with him, and meanwhile his concubines sang (one as a soloist, the rest as the chorus) and played the lyre.¹¹⁵ It is difficult to know what to make of these contradictory depictions. Herodotus' account is contemporary but is also designed to contrast Persian customs with Greek customs, which kept honorable women excluded from meals entirely. Greek

112. Hdt. 5.18.

113. Plutarch, *Artaxerxes*, 5.3.

114. Plutarch, *Moralia*, 140b, translated in Kuhrt, *The Persian Empire*, 593.

115. Heracleides of Cumae, Persica = FGGrH 689 F2, quoted by Athenaeus 4.145b–146a. In Kuhrt, *The Persian Empire*, 610.

symposia, for example, were closed to all women except for those intended for sex and entertainment. The abominable behavior of the Persians in the story is that they request free Macedonian women to be brought to them and therefore partake in a role Greeks reserved for slaves and women of low repute.¹¹⁶ On the other hand, Plutarch seems to make little distinction between concubines and sex slaves. As we have seen with the example of Amasis' daughter, concubines could be very high born. It is absurd to imagine the daughter of a pharaoh being excluded from the formal feast only to be brought in with exotic dancers once the wine started to flow. On the other hand, Plutarch's distinction would line up nicely with Aelian's account of Aspasia's introduction to Cyrus. It was after the main meal and during the drinking portion that Aspasia and the other virgins were brought into Cyrus' presence.¹¹⁷ A further indication that Plutarch's distinction is correct is a funerary stele from Daskylion in Anatolia, which depicts a Persian woman reclining next to her husband at a banquet.¹¹⁸ Heracleides would have us believe that both wife (wives) and concubines were present but in very different capacities, the former sharing the king's table and the latter relegated to entertainment. The common Greek failure to recognize high-status concubines makes unraveling the exact details of this distinction difficult. Nevertheless, it seems best to accept that there was indeed a general distinction between the two at royal dinners; how flexible or inflexible that distinction was is impossible to say.

116. We should also be conscious that the whole story may be a fabrication by the Macedonian king Alexander I to clear himself of the charge of "Medizing" during the Persian invasion. In Herodotus' account, Alexander (then crown prince) was so outraged by the Persians' behavior that he had his beardless companions dress up in women's clothing, go in to the Persians while the latter were drunk, and kill them all. That such a thing could happen without Persian retaliation seems ludicrous, and therefore the story is likely propaganda circulated after the Persian defeat in 479 BC by Alexander himself.

117. Aelian, *Varia Historia*, 12.1.

118. Maria Brosius, "The Royal Audience Scene Reconsidered," in *The World of Achaemenid Persia: History, Art and Society in Iran and the Ancient Near East*, ed. John Curtis and St. John Simpson (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010), 141–152.

Athenaeus makes a another distinction between wives (in this case a single queen) and concubines regarding their relationship with each other: “Among the Persians, the queen puts up with a large number of concubines because the king rules his wedded wife like a master, but also for another reason, as told by Deinon in his *Persica*: the queen is treated with respect by the concubines; in fact, they have to do obeisance before her.”¹¹⁹ This is a difficult passage to interpret, especially since, as we have established already, there was not necessarily a clearly defined queen at the Persian court. Would such deference be shown by concubines to all legal wives as well, or only to the one designated as a chief wife? We hear how Aspasia, even in her position as the king’s favorite, was very careful to show respect to the queen mother,¹²⁰ but we hear of no interaction between Aspasia and a legal wife. Would lesser legal wives have to show such deference to a chief legal wife? Could legal wives be required to show deference to a concubine held in higher favor than they were? We simply do not have enough information to draw any firm conclusions.

Summary: Female Positions at the Persian Court

The evidence for female positions at the Persian court is frustratingly lacking, and the evidence we do have often presents contradictory pictures. Our ancient sources routinely distinguish between wives and concubines but fail to provide any concrete explanation of the precise difference. If there has to be a distinction, ethnicity seems most natural: Persians were wives, non-Persians concubines. That being said, we should not necessarily conclude that wives

119. Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists*, 13.556b.

120. Aelian, *Varia Historia*, 12.1. Cyrus acquired a beautiful necklace and offered it to Aspasia, who insisted he give it to his mother Parysatis instead. Aspasia assured Cyrus she would show him a “neck beautiful enough without it.”

automatically achieved a higher position. A woman's power and position at the royal court seem to have been *entirely* dependent on the favor of the king. This favor could be bestowed on any woman regardless of her status as a wife or concubine, her ethnicity, or her family heritage. Aspasia gives us a prime example of a low-born foreigner who won the affection of a Persian king (Artaxerxes II), a rival for the throne (Cyrus the Younger), and the heir to the throne (Darius II) with nothing but her appearance and personal charm. Although Greek writers refer to a single queen, there seems to be no such clearly defined position. Rather, the natural conclusion seems to be that a "queen" was whatever woman occupied the unofficial position of royal favorite or was mother to the son designated by the king as heir. A king's mother often exercised more influence than other women, but not necessarily so. In conclusion, we cannot define any royal position at the Persian court with any degree of certainty. It appears that the best framework for understanding the Persian court is to see it as an *ad hoc* affair, in which status fluctuated with the king's affections and all other qualifications for status were secondary.

ASPECTS OF THE ESTHER STORY IN A PERSIAN CONTEXT

Having explored the extrabiblical evidence for the function of women at the Persian court, we will now examine various aspects of the Esther story and how they might fit into a Persian context. Specifically, we will analyze whether the details of the narrative are more compatible with the role of a wife or a concubine although, as noted above, the distinction is often historically hazy.

Vashti at Xerxes' Banquet

Esther, not Vashti, is the main subject of our inquiry, but it is worth analyzing Vashti's deposal at Xerxes' banquet because the story clearly presents Esther as taking over Vashti's role, whatever it may be. What we can say about Vashti we likely can say also about Esther.

Was Vashti a legal wife or a concubine, and why did she refuse Xerxes' orders to appear at the party? It is difficult to answer given what our Greek sources say about the distinction between wives and concubines at banquets. Herodotus would have us believe that both attended their men after the dinner and once the drinking had begun,¹²¹ while Plutarch describes wives eating with the men during the meal itself and then being dismissed while the concubines and other women of ill repute came in for the more riotous second half.¹²² If Herodotus were correct,

121. Hdt. 5.18.

122. Plutarch, *Moralia*, 140b.

we might expect Vashti to make no fuss about the command to display herself before Xerxes and his drinking companions. If Plutarch is correct (and this seems likely), and if Vashti was a legal wife, she would have been rightly insulted to receive such a summons. As Holt explains, “The king’s command demands that the queen enters the male space; indeed, through his command the king himself transgresses the boundaries between female and male space, where only indecent women appear.”¹²³ The same is probably true if she was a concubine of noble, but not Persian, status; being lumped together with women designated for entertainment and sex would be insulting. Of course, Herodotus and Plutarch may simply be confused or misinformed about the Persian practice.

The example of Aspasia shows us that even a low-born concubine could try to maintain her dignity before her royal male superior. Aelian tells us that when Cyrus’ men paraded Aspasia and the other concubines before him, the others had adorned themselves to catch his attention and happily allowed Cyrus to approach and fondle them. Aspasia, meanwhile, refused any adornment, kept a sullen expression, and resisted Cyrus’ attempts to touch her.¹²⁴ It is possible that her behavior was exaggerated by those who passed down her story—a Greek might have loved the idea that one of their own bravely refused to be treated like a slave by the barbarians—but that does not necessarily make her story unbelievable. We should probably not assume a uniform behavior for either concubines or the kings who desired them. As today, for every Cyrus who is drawn to a strong woman who refuses to be pushed around, there is a Xerxes who flies into a rage when refused. Aspasia was taking a serious risk by rejecting Cyrus’ advances, but it paid off. Plutarch also suggests that a concubine could maintain some level of freedom from the

123. Else K. Holt, *Narrative and Other Readings in the Book of Esther* (London: T&T Clark, 2021), 75.

124. Aelian, *Varia Historia*, 12.1.

demands of the king. When Darius II asked his father Artaxerxes II to give him Aspasia as a gift, Artaxerxes insisted that Darius not force her against her will.¹²⁵ Aspasia's defense of her honor suggests that even if Vashti were a low-born concubine, she would not have been totally out of bounds to resist Xerxes' shameful summons, though she would be doing so at her own risk.

We cannot be certain if Vashti was a legal wife or Xerxes' favorite concubine, but several factors would point us toward the latter. If she was the chief legal wife, Plutarch would lead us to believe she should have been present with Xerxes already for the first portion of the banquet. That she was not might suggest she was either a legal wife held in lower esteem or a concubine. That the author of Esther calls her "queen," however, would seem to rule out that she was a legal wife of low rank. It also seems unlikely that a low-ranking wife would have hosted her own female banquet. Although far from provable, a possible solution seems to be that Vashti was, like Aspasia, a concubine, and her title "queen" was meant to communicate not an official position but rather her current status as Xerxes' favorite. Although not a legal wife, Vashti would have been free to defend her honor, although at personal risk. She rightly viewed parading herself before Xerxes' drunk companions as demeaning and so, like Aspasia, refused. Unlike Aspasia, her lord did not take it kindly.

Llewellyn-Jones notes another factor that made Vashti's appearance at the drinking portion of the banquet dishonorable: "The high rank of Persia's royal females, like that of the Great King himself, was expressed by their conspicuous invisibility. This is the key needed to unlock Vashti's story."¹²⁶ Persian women were not excluded from society, but they were

125. Plutarch, *Artaxerxes*, 27.2. When Aspasia agreed to leave Artaxerxes for Darius, however, Artaxerxes refused to let her go and instead bound her in chastity as a priestess.

126. Llewellyn-Jones, *Ancient Persia and the Book of Esther*, 109.

separated, much like the king himself as we see clearly in the Esther story (as he cannot be approached without permission). A woman's separation from public view enhanced her honor.¹²⁷ Vashti understood that she would not be demeaning herself only sexually, but also socially, by allowing everyone at Xerxes' banquet to lay eyes on her.

Llewellyn-Jones interprets the Esther story as fiction and therefore sees Vashti as the chief queen and legal wife, not a concubine. He points out, however, that "interestingly, Persia's royal concubines operated in this sphere of high-status invisibility as well"¹²⁸ and cites Plutarch: "The barbarians are so zealous concerning licentiousness that a man incurs the death sentence not only for coming up and touching a royal concubine, but even for approaching the wagons in which they are conveyed."¹²⁹ Therefore the story of Vashti appears to make sense regardless of whether she was a legal wife or Xerxes' current favorite concubine.

Esther's Concealed Identity

The drama and suspense of the book of Esther center largely on the fact that Esther hides her Judahite identity until the climactic banquet with Haman. We are told in Esther 2:10 that Mordecai ordered her not to reveal her עַם (people) or מוֹלָדָתָהּ (kindred). If Esther were a legal wife of Xerxes, it would be difficult to imagine she could have lasted so long without revealing her background. Whereas any woman could become a concubine, wives were no doubt selected for political advantages¹³⁰ and to bear legitimate heirs. Herodotus' claim that heirs had to be born

127. Llewellyn-Jones, *Ancient Persia and the Book of Esther*, 108.

128. Llewellyn-Jones, *Ancient Persia and the Book of Esther*, 109.

129. Plutarch, *Artaxerxes*, 27.1, author's translation.

130. Llewellyn-Jones, *Ancient Persia and the Book of Esther*, 153.

to wives and not concubines was evidently not an absolute law (as in the case of Darius II), but it probably was the default practice.¹³¹ The fact that Esther is able to conceal her identity supports her status as a concubine rather than a legal wife.

Selection of Young Women

The induction of beautiful virgins into the royal palace in Esther 2 fits remarkably well with what we know about the Persian harem. Several ancient sources mention how captive women were brought to the palace as war booty. An extract from a Babylonian chronicle mentions how female prisoners from Sidon arrived in the king's palace.¹³² Herodotus describes how the Persians, upon quelling the Ionian Revolt, selected the handsomest boys and prettiest girls for royal service; the males were castrated and the women taken to the king's harem.¹³³ He likewise records the story of Coan, the concubine freed by the Greek victory at Plataea, who begs the Spartan commander Pausanias to save her from "captive slavery" (αἰχμαλώτου δουλοσύνης).¹³⁴ Athenaeus speaks of a concubine named Timosa who was sent as a gift to Stateira, the wife of the king, by the king of Egypt.¹³⁵ Attractive youths of both genders could even become a province's regular tribute, as indeed was the case for the Colchians who had to send one hundred boys and one hundred girls to the Persians every five years.¹³⁶ Llewellyn-Jones states, "The

131. Hdt. 3.2.

132. Babylonian Chronicle extract: ABC, no. 9, translated by Glassner; quoted in Kuhrt, *The Persian Empire: A Corpus of Sources from the Achaemenid Period*, 412.

133. Hdt. 6.32.

134. Hdt. 9.76.

135. Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists*, 13.609.

136. Hdt. 3.97.

empire-wide hunt for suitably fertile, and preferably pretty, girls is a historical reality. Satraps, regional governors and specially commissioned scouts—as noted in Esther—were required to conscript and send to Persia human ‘gifts’: handsome castrated boys and pretty fertile girls.”¹³⁷

Not all women who arrived at the royal palace found themselves in the king’s bed. Briant notes that many “disappeared instead into the huge domestic staff of the palace; the Babylonian texts call these people *arad ari* ‘royal slaves’ and *arad ekalli* ‘palace slaves’. The women and girl captives without special training worked in various parts of the palace. They might also join the staffs of the wives and princesses, who were provided with a large number of servants.”¹³⁸ Those deemed attractive enough to be brought before the king then had to impress him. Aelian describes in his account of Aspasia how the three other women led before Cyrus alongside Aspasia prepared and presented themselves:

The three were beautifully prepared, having been dressed by the female slaves who attended them. They had their hair braided and adorned their faces with cosmetics and ointments. They had been taught by their nurses how to pass in front of Cyrus and how to flatter him, not to turn away when he approached or recoil when he touched them, and to endure his kisses—lessons and instructions very much befitting courtesans and women who sell their beauty like merchants. Each strove to outperform the others in beauty. But Aspasia was not willing to put on an extravagant dress, thinking it improper to wrap herself in a colorful garment, nor did she consent to be bathed...believing that she was enduring clear and obvious slavery by allowing her body to be clothed and adorned so far out of the ordinary ... grieving because she was being compelled to act not like a virgin, but like a courtesan.... Meanwhile the other girls smiled and put on cheerful expressions when they approached him.... And when he ordered them to sit near him, they readily obeyed.... They permitted Cyrus to touch and examine their eyes, cheeks, and fingers.¹³⁹

137. Llewellyn-Jones, *Ancient Persia and the Book of Esther*, 128.

138. Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander*, 279.

139. Aelian, *Varia Historia*, 12.1 (author’s translation).

The details of this story line up nicely with those in Esther. The prospective concubines are given personal attendants to advise them in how to make themselves most appealing (2:9) and prepare themselves with beauty treatments, various cosmetics, and elaborate clothing (2:4, 9, 12, 15). The striking similarities here strongly suggest that the events of Esther 2 describe a process for choosing concubines, not legal wives.

Another detail also suggests Esther's status as a concubine. While the narrative of the Esther story is structured around a one-for-one swap, Esther for Vashti, 2:19 indicates that the search for women did not end once Xerxes made Esther "queen." The author of Esther indicates that Mordecai uncovered the assassination plot against Xerxes "when the virgins were assembled a second time." In other words, the search for new women was an ongoing process even once Esther had won Xerxes' heart. If Xerxes' goal throughout this process had been to find a single official queen, he would have had no reason to continue the process once he had discovered Esther. Yet women arrive to present themselves before Xerxes again even while Esther now wears the crown.

If the search for young women that produced Esther was a routine procedure for stocking the harem with fresh concubines, then how can we understand the story's portrayal of it as an attempt to replace one woman, Vashti? Perhaps Xerxes' desire to find a replacement for Vashti was more emotional than official: he sought to find a special woman to occupy an empty place in his heart, not an empty seat on the imperial throne. It would make sense that Xerxes, returning from his failed Greek campaign and fresh off the romantic frustrations experienced in the Masistes affair, remembered Vashti and went on the hunt to procure a new favorite concubine to serve him the way she had. That he found one who so impressed him did not mean he would cease bringing new women into his palace and bed on a regular basis.

Coronation, Feast, and Marks of Queenship

Once Xerxes discovers Esther, he announces her ascent in splendid fashion. He places a royal crown on her head and makes her queen and then gives an elaborate banquet in which he liberally distributes gifts (2:17–18). What are we to make of these details? Could such ceremonies accompany the elevation of a mere concubine to the unofficial position of royal favorite?

We must be cautious in approaching this account. Although Briant notes that “the category of ‘wife’ was distinguished from the category of ‘concubine’ by means of an official ceremony,”¹⁴⁰ we have no clear account of the royal investiture of a woman outside of the Esther story. We must also avoid imposing our own connotations of royal ceremony and symbolism onto this ancient account. A royal crown, for example, was not exclusively worn by members of the royal family, despite claims to the contrary such as Holt’s.¹⁴¹ Llewellyn-Jones acknowledges that members of the court at Persepolis sometimes wore crowns.¹⁴² Henkelman notes that on the Behistun Inscription, King Darius is set apart not from the fact that he alone wears a crown, but that his crown is crenelated while those of his noblemen are not.¹⁴³ He also points out what appears to be a relief of an old nobleman wearing a crenelated crown in Artaxerxes’ tripylon

140. Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander*, 278.

141. Holt, *Narrative and Other Readings in the Book of Esther*, 75. Holt notes that the crown marks queenship and would not be worn by concubines.

142. Llewellyn-Jones, *King and Court in Ancient Persia*, 60.

143. Wouter F. M. Henkelman, “The Royal Achaemenid Crown,” *Archäologische Mitteilungen aus Iran* 28 (1995/96): 276.

(council hall).¹⁴⁴ We have depictions of various court members sporting crowns. A textile fragment from the Crimea shows four Achaemenid women,¹⁴⁵ two tall and two short, all wearing similar crowns, the larger size of the two center women indicating their higher status.¹⁴⁶ Clearly the presence of a crown in and of itself cannot be interpreted here as indicative of a single reigning queen if all four women wear them. A cylinder seal depicts a woman seated on a throne and wearing a crown, with two other women standing in her presence, the larger of whom also wears a crown.¹⁴⁷ Another crown can be found adorning a miniature head which Llewellyn-Jones says may depict a woman, a boy/prince, or even a eunuch.¹⁴⁸ He summarizes,

It is hard to know whether all crowned women in the rare depictions of women we have from Achaemenid Persia should be regarded as royal. A woman represented on a grave stele from Daskylion in Anatolia, for instance, is seated on a couch next to her husband; she wears a tall mural crown (in this instance partly covered by a veil). She is probably not to be regarded an Achaemenid princess although she borrows from Achaemenid fashion in her bid for a high-status representation.¹⁴⁹

One striking absence from the account of Esther's ascent is any mention of an actual marriage or wedding ceremony. Llewellyn-Jones comments on Esther 2:17:

There is no hint of a marriage ceremony between Xerxes and Esther. In fact, we know nothing about ancient Persian wedding rites, nor do we hear about any formal ceremonial in which a woman was recognized as queen; it is very unlikely that royal consorts went through a coronation ritual (after all, as has been noted, even kings precluded the idea of a coronation in place of the more culturally significant investiture ceremony). The crown

144. Henkelman, "The Royal Achaemenid Crown," 282.

145. Earlier scholarship had concluded that Persian women were never depicted in art and that all females in Persian art must therefore be deities. For a refutation of this notion, see Maria Brosius, "The Royal Audience Scene Reconsidered."

146. Llewellyn-Jones, *Ancient Persia and the Book of Esther*, 99.

147. Llewellyn-Jones, *King and Court in Ancient Persia*, 227.

148. Llewellyn Jones, *Ancient Persia and the Book of Esther*, 98; *King and Court in Ancient Persia*, 211.

149. Llewellyn-Jones, *Ancient Persia and the Book of Esther*, 99.

mentioned here in v. 17 simply cements the idea that Esther has replaced Vashti who was last seen in the same crown in 1:11.¹⁵⁰

Given our lack of information about Persian marriage ceremonies and the widespread use of crowns (that is, widespread in that more than a single king and queen wore them), we cannot use Esther's "coronation" scene to determine her exact status as a wife or concubine. A royal crown may have been a sign of the king's favor more than a mark of an official position; after all, Mordecai receives the honor of sporting a robe previously worn by the king when a procession is thrown in his honor, though we get no indication that he received a new formal position or title at that time.

Entering the King's Presence

A major point of the drama in the Esther story is the danger she faces in approaching Xerxes without being summoned. To come before the monarch without being summoned can result in a death sentence if the king does not grant pardon. That this would be generally true for anyone outside of the royal family would make sense. However, if Plutarch is correct that the king's wife/wives and children shared meals with him on a regular basis, it would seem difficult to imagine that approaching him elsewhere carried a possible death sentence. Indeed, Brosius notes that royal women had the right to attend the king's audiences and cites Nehemiah 2:6 as an example.¹⁵¹ That concubines were not afforded the same access is easier to imagine. When Mordecai persuades Esther to intercede with the king, she notes that she has not been called into

150. Llewellyn-Jones, *Ancient Persia and the Book of Esther*, 152.

151. Maria Brosius, "New out of Old? Court and Court Ceremonies in Achaemenid Persia," in *The Court and Court Society in Ancient Monarchies*, ed. A. J. S. Spawforth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 33–34.

Xerxes' presence for thirty days (4:11), a further indication that Esther does not take part in the common royal meals.

A Royal Woman (Not) Acting as Intercessor

In the climactic moment of the Esther story, the heroine reveals Haman's plot to Xerxes, who flies into a rage. Haman feels the ground fall out from under his feet and, while Xerxes fumes in the nearby garden, Haman falls on Esther's couch to beg for mercy (7:6–8). There is an important distinction to make here. It does *not* appear that Haman is begging Esther for mercy because *she* has the power to spare him. Rather, he begs Esther to *intercede* on his behalf with Xerxes, who alone has the power to grant him his life. Serving as intercessor is a recurring role among royal women in the ancient Near East. In the Bible, Bathsheba serves as intercessor before Solomon on behalf of Adonijah (1 Kgs 2:13–25), even though Adonijah had threatened the reign of her son. Abigail likewise begged David for mercy toward her household (1 Sam. 25). We also have similar incidents from Persian history. Ctesias records an incident when royal Persian women interceded on behalf of a man named Megabyzus, whom Artaxerxes had ordered executed for killing a lion that the king was hunting: "And the king was reconciled with [Megabyzus] thanks to Amestris and Amytis and made him a messmate as he had been before."¹⁵² Herodotus likewise describes how Darius planned to execute his nobleman Intaphrenes and all the latter's male relatives for plotting against him, but was convinced by Intaphrenes' wife to spare one of them.¹⁵³ Concubines as well as wives could serve as mediators

152. Llewellyn-Jones and Robson, *Ctesias*, 190.

153. Hdt. 3.119. Bizarrely, she chose to spare her brother over her husband or children. When Darius asked why, she answered that she could acquire another husband and have more children but could never replace a lost brother.

between ruler and subject. The Greek statesman Themistocles once offended the Persian satrap of Sardis but managed to assuage his anger by appealing to the satrap's concubines, who interceded for him.¹⁵⁴ Xenophon provides another example, describing a woman named Mania attempting to gain the favor of Pharnabazus' concubines and other court officials in order to gain an interview with the satrap.¹⁵⁵ Although royal women could be merciless in their own right (as Esther is here; she makes no attempt to save Haman), feminine stereotypes seem to have resulted in a custom in which women were expected to prefer mercy over vengeance. In listening to the pleading of a woman, a male ruler could then show mercy as a favor to her. Haman therefore begs Esther to plead on his behalf to Xerxes. His plea does not indicate that Esther has any power in her own right as queen to grant him his life.

Such intercession never takes place in the Esther story, however. Before Esther can respond to Haman (and who knows what she would have said?), Xerxes reappears and interprets Haman's supplication as an attempt to sexually violate his queen. Llewellyn-Jones notes that there is much going on here: for one, "Haman's physical approach on Esther would have been in contravention of all rules of decorum."¹⁵⁶ Plutarch described how the Persians "vehemently guard not only their lawful wives, but also their purchased women and concubines, so that they are never seen by outsiders. Rather they live at home in complete seclusion, and even on journeys they are enclosed in tents carried on the carts."¹⁵⁷ We have already noted Plutarch's

154. Plutarch, *Themistocles*, 31.2.

155. Xenophon, *Hellenica* 3.1.10

156. Llewellyn-Jones, *Ancient Persia and the Book of Esther*, 216–17.

157. Plutarch, *Themistocles*, 26.4, author's translation.

claim that even passing by the carriages in which royal concubines were transported could carry the death sentence.¹⁵⁸

Llewellyn-Jones also describes how Haman's touching of Esther was not just a breach of decorum but was in fact (or at least perceived to be by Xerxes) tantamount to a coup. To take a king's woman was to lay claim to his throne.¹⁵⁹ Llewellyn-Jones cites the examples of Darius I marrying all the royal women in the line of Cyrus the Great and wives/sisters of Cambyses and Bardiya, and of Alexander the Great using his capture of Darius III's harem following the battle of Issus to prop up his claim to the throne. The biblical account of Absalom sleeping with David's concubines during his attempted coup is another example (2 Sam 16:22).

Haman is now triply guilty: he has misled the king to order the extermination of a whole people merely to retaliate against one man (and a man who had served the king very well); he has breached every court protocol by invading Esther's personal space and touching her; and in doing the latter he has become, intentionally or not, a would-be usurper. Xerxes cannot contain his anger and orders Haman impaled. Esther, the only one who could speak up to intercede and beg for mercy, remains quiet.

158. Plutarch, *Artaxerxes*, 27.1.

159. Llewellyn-Jones, *Ancient Persia and the Book of Esther*, 217.

CONCLUSION

The ancient evidence I have analyzed is scattered and frequently contradictory, and it allows us to draw no firm conclusions about what position Esther may have held at the Persian court. No solution can take into account all the available evidence. The solution I propose below is not one I feel I can conclusively prove, or anything near it. Rather it is a solution that appears to me to have been left out of the general discussion about Esther's role that I believe warrants consideration.

The solution that to me makes most sense of the available data is that Esther was Xerxes' favorite concubine. That favored position had previously been held by Vashti, likely another concubine, who when deposed simply faded into obscurity within the harem or was removed from it entirely. Esther, much like the Greek Aspasia several decades later, won the king's affection through her personal charm and therefore she was elevated to a position of prominence in a harem that operated on what was effectively an *ad hoc* basis. The Persian position of queen was therefore not an established office so much as it was an informal position of prominence.

This solution would solve several problems. First, it would eliminate the issue of Amestris, who could have remained Xerxes' foremost legal wife and mother of his heir throughout his entire reign, without needing to manufacture a fall from grace period that is totally absent in our non-biblical sources. We can imagine Xerxes doting on his new favorite concubine without repudiating his most prominent legal wife. Second, this solution would make good sense of several details in the Esther account that align much more with the role of a concubine than a wife. Esther's process of selection, her inability to come before Xerxes without

permission, and her concealed identity are all much more plausible for a concubine than a legal wife. Finally, if Esther was a concubine, then it is less surprising that she goes entirely unmentioned in the Greek or Persian sources.

The major obstacle to this solution is that Esther is repeatedly referred to as queen, a term that appears to have usually been applied to first-rank wives. As I explored above, however, the term is rarely used and could potentially refer to more than a single reigning female monarch. It appears to me very possible that a Judahite author could attach the title to the king's favorite concubine who, by virtue of being the favorite, held an unofficial but nevertheless real and important position within the harem. However, we have no conclusive evidence that the title ever *was* used that way. This leaves us once again arguing from what is possible rather than what is probable or provable.

A further aspect to consider is the relation between the historical events and the narrative that preserves them. Even if we accept the Esther narrative as a reflection of something that "really happened," there is still a difference between "what really happened" and how an author can structure his account of it. Is it possible that no actual Persian would have ever considered calling Esther "the queen," but the author of the Esther story has chosen to employ that term for his own narrative purposes? Such a narrative decision seems at least possible on several levels. For one, it is possible that Persians and exilic Judahites differed in their opinions of what made a queen. Second, the narrator may have employed a simple term like "queen" to avoid the difficulty of needing to explain the complicated innerworkings of the Achaemenid harem. Finally, calling Esther a queen works beautifully in the narrator's portrayal of the one-for-one swap of Esther for Vashti. One queen is deposed, another rises in her place. Especially if one

views the whole Esther story as a vivid example of Yahweh's behind-the-scenes providential care, the drama is only heightened by providing Esther such a title.

APPENDIX: A CHRONOLOGY OF XERXES' REIGN

Exact dates for the life of Xerxes and the events of the Esther story are not always possible. All dates are BC.

518	Birth of Xerxes (approximate).
486	Death of Darius I; Xerxes becomes king.
484	Xerxes suppresses the Egyptian revolt and first Babylonian revolt.
483–482	Xerxes' banquet; Vashti is deposed (Esther 1).
483	Xerxes begins preparations for the invasion of Greece.
482	Outbreak of the second Babylonian revolt.
481	Xerxes suppresses the second Babylonian revolt.
480	Xerxes invades Greece; Persian victory at Thermopylae; Xerxes sacks Athens; Persian defeat at Salamis; Xerxes departs Greece.
479	Persian defeats at Plataea and Mycale.
479–478	Masistes affair; Xerxes returns to Susa; Selection of Esther to replace Vashti (Esther 2).
474–473	Plot of Haman (Esther 3–9).
465	Assassination of Xerxes; Artaxerxes I becomes king.
424	Death of Amestris.

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