

Replicating Royal Power: The Satraps of the Achaemenid Persian Empire (550-330 BCE)

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At its height the Achaemenid Persian Empire would stretch from Eastern Europe and Libya to Central Asia and the Indus river valley. While the Great King's court generally remained in the imperial heartland, representatives of the King, called satraps, acted as interfaces with local, subordinate populations across the Empire. This paper will argue that these satraps, the super-elites of the Empire, were meant to imitate the power of the Achaemenid King at a regional level and that, moreover, this mode of governance developed as a response to the challenges faced by Achaemenid empire-builders. As the rulers of the largest ever land empire prior to the Umayyad Caliphate, the Achaemenid Kings were necessarily limited in their infrastructural reach: even by optimistic estimates, it would have taken some two weeks for a message to travel from the royal court to an imperial periphery. Therefore, the King and his court empowered satraps to behave as kings in miniature: they had their own courts, they commanded the military, and they controlled fiscal operations. But this royal reduplication extended beyond superficialities: artistic forms of royal art were replicated in satrapal centers, specificities of language were copied—notable across the highly multilingual empire—and administrative practices were reduplicated.

This royal imitation separated satraps from local elites. What united the King and the satraps, in fact, was their ability to transcend local particularities: both controlled property across presumed territoriality, both adopted eclectic modes of display, both acquired subordinates of various ethnicities. Although most satraps had roots in Persia (roughly modern Fārs, Iran), over time some non-Persians were admitted into the satrapal ranks, so long as they could prove themselves capable of replicating royal power. But we must be wary of painting too rosy a picture of satrapal rule. The royal court fostered competition, at times violent, among satraps: one-upmanship in the practices of imperialism allowed individual satraps to curry greater royal favor just as it encouraged the investment of maximal satrapal resources into statecraft. As this paper will demonstrate, the distinct practices of satrapal governance allowed the Achaemenid Empire to endure at such scale for over two centuries.