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What Persians Wear: Herodotus 5.49.3 and Aristophanes, *Birds* 486-87

Greeks were fascinated by what Persians wore, particularly those articles of clothing most exotic from a Greek point of view, such as trousers and the *tiara*, a type of cap alternately called *kid(t)aris* or *kurbasia* by sources. In this paper, I argue that the *kurbasia* was actually a distinct headdress worn by the Sacas, an eastern Scythian people. Both the ancient and modern identification of the *kurbasia* with the *tiara* is ultimately based on a misunderstanding of two passages, Herodotus 5.49.3 and Aristophanes, *Birds* 486-87. Scholars have not appreciated that the derisive tone with which both Herodotus and Aristophanes use the word *kurbasia* in these passages significantly affects the word's interpretation.

It is true that ancient lexicographers and scholiasts who mention the *kurbasia* often equate it explicitly with the *tiara*. But a careful reading reveals that their most influential sources for this identification are Herodotus and Aristophanes. Modern scholars usually follow much the same procedure, citing first Herodotus and Aristophanes; then the ancient commentators.

For Herodotus, however, *kurbasia* does not appear to be a mere synonym for *tiara*. While discussing Xerxes' army, he says that the Persians wore "unstiffened felt caps called *tiarai*" (7.61.1), whereas the Sacas wore "*kurbasiai*, fixed erect [and] brought to a point" (7.64.2). The term *kurbasia* appears once more, when the Milesian Aristagoras appeals to the Spartan king Cleomenes for aid during the Ionian Revolt. He assures Cleomenes that the "barbarians" will be easily overcome since they "go into battle wearing trousers and, on their heads, *kurbasiai*," while they carry bows and short spears (5.49.3). Aristagoras demeans the barbarians as warriors: trousers (often ridiculed in literature), bows (the weapon of cowards), and short spears. His choice of *kurbasia* may have been determined by this same rhetorical strategy. Perhaps the *kurbasia* was more laughable to Greeks than even the *tiara*.

The evidence from Aristophanes suggests that this was the case. In *Birds*, Peisetaerus claims that the cock once ruled the Persians (481-85). Euelpides observes, "So because of that even now he walks about like the Great King, alone of birds, with the *kurbasia* erect on his head" (486-87). Aristophanes modifies the detail that only the Persian King could wear his *tiara* (or *kid(t)aris*) "erect" by the substitution of *kurbasia*. The other two terms do not appear in his writings, but *kurbasia* occurs again in Fragment 559 K.-A.: Alcibiades' leather cap is likened to a *kurbasia*. Aristophanes preferred *kurbasia* presumably because it was the funniest word available for barbarian headgear.

Much as he does with *kurbasia*, Aristophanes associates camels with Persians. In *Birds*, when Tereus points to a bird called a *medos*, Euelpides exclaims, "A Mede! ... How then did he fly here without a camel?" (278). The historian Herodotus, by contrast, although noting that camels were in the Persian army's baggage train and were the mounts for Arabians, refrains from saying that Persians or Medes ever rode camels. Similarly, the

Herodotean Aristagoras never mentions Persians or Medes, but simply says "barbarians" wore *kurbasiai*. The comic poet, however, feels as free to put Persians on camels, outlandish eastern animals, as to put *kurbasiai*, outlandish eastern hats, on Persians' heads.

Greek and Persian art, moreover, support the contention that the Sacas had headdresses different from the Persians. Whether on ordinary Persians or "erect" on the King, Persian caps are not represented as ascending to a point. The Sacas, however, wear pointed caps that greatly resemble those described by Herodotus in 7.64.2. It seems, then, that the Greek name for such a Sacan cap was *kurbasia*.