Introduction

True to its title, this book is about postal systems in the pre-modern Islamic world. Although the terms 'postal system', 'pre-modern', and 'Islamic world' may seem self-explanatory, they deserve our attention here nonetheless, for they can be deceptively ambiguous.

Postal systems of the sort described in this book differ from modern ones in three ways. First, a modern postal system is defined by its role as an organisation that transports items for a fee. Pre-modern systems, by contrast, were defined by their method of transportation. The term 'postal' refers to the fact that people and riding-mounts were *posted* at convenient intervals along a route in order to allow couriers to rest periodically and obtain fresh mounts for the next leg of their journey.[1] Hence, whereas modern postal systems can deliver mail by aeroplane, ship, or road, pre-modern systems were – strictly speaking – exclusively road-based networks of mounted couriers.

Second, owing to the fact that pre-modern postal systems were not defined by their function, they served in a number of capacities that would not be expected of their modern counterparts. For instance, whereas in the pre-modern world privileged people such as envoys and ambassadors could be transported to their destination by post, in the modern world such practices would probably be considered a moderate form of torture rather than a privilege. Furthermore, the fact that pre-modern systems were almost always the speediest method of communication available meant that they were the most effective way of transmitting important information or intelligence reports from afar. Indeed, any history of intelligence systems almost inevitably becomes a history of postal systems, and *vice versa*.[2] Vestiges of the fact that news in Antiquity was closely associated with the method of its transmission are apparent in current newspaper titles, where the words 'Post', 'Mail', and 'Courier' are ubiquitous. Even in the Arab world, where postal

---

[1] On pre-modern postal systems in general, see. L. Zilliacus, *From Pillar to Post: The Troubled History of the Mail*, London, 1956.

[2] E.g. F. Dvornik, *The Origins of Intelligence Services*, New Jersey, 1974, which focuses on postal systems.

1

2   Introduction

systems from the seventh century until modern times have been labelled
'al-Barīd', newspapers have included the word Barīd in their title.[3]

Third, the facilities of pre-modern postal systems were reserved for the ruling
authorities in a way that modern systems are not. In fact, most pre-modern
systems were governmental institutions whose services were officially inacces-
sible to even the wealthiest of private citizens. The pre-modern world was not
characterised by the literacy rates of the modern West, and the tightly knit
social structure of traditional societies did not encourage the dispersal of close
acquaintances that is commonplace nowadays. For these reasons, most pre-
modern people would have had no need to write and send letters to distant
lands (assuming they could write at all). When ordinary people – pilgrims and
merchants, for instance – wanted to communicate with distant acquaintances,
they would resort to relatively haphazard methods of communication such as
entrusting letters to passing caravans or, in the case of wealthy individuals, to
privately arranged couriers. On occasion, well-organised interest groups could
even establish their own, independent postal systems, and numerous examples
of such institutions are attested for medieval Europe, where universities, mer-
chants, and even butchers developed private courier systems.[4] But the postal
systems that interest us here were governmental organisations the likes of
which existed in most periods and regions of the pre-modern Islamic world.

The definition of 'pre-modern' in this context is dictated by two factors.
The first is the emergence of modern techniques of telecommunication,
paticularly the telegraph, during the Ottoman period.[5] The telegraph was to
pre-modern systems of communication what gunpowder was to ancient war-
fare: the beginning of a new chapter (or in this case, a new book) of history.
The second is the privatisation of Near Eastern postal systems in the sixteenth
century. Privatisation could entail either the devolution of control of the
postal system to non-governmental bodies or the formal acceptance by the
government that civilians might use the system's services for a fee.[6] These

---

[3] E.g. the Saudi Arabian journal *Barīd al-Ḥijāz* (1920s Jeddah, editor in chief: Muḥammad
Naṣīf). Due, perhaps, to its location along the Silk Route, Kazakhstan's most popular tabloid
is called *Karavan*. For the relationship between newspapers and postal systems, see
M. Stephens, *A History of News: From the Drum to the Satellite*, London, 1997.

[4] On which, see *La Circulation des nouvelles au moyen âge*, (no editor), Rome, 1994;
D. Gazagnadou, *La Poste à relais: la diffusion d'une technique de pouvoir à travers l'Eurasie –
Chine – Islam – Europe*, Paris, 1994, pp. 83–97; and E. Ashtor, *The Levant Trade in the Later
Middle Ages*, Princeton, 1983, pp. 379–81. The legacy of the enterprising Taxis family, whose
postal system linked much of Europe from the fourteenth to nineteenth centuries, is apparent in
the modern word 'taxi' for hired transport. On private communications networks in Islamic
history, see below, pp. 116–21.

[5] See Y. Bektas, 'The Sultan's Messenger: Cultural Constructions of Ottoman Telegraphy',
Technology and Culture 41 (2000), 669–96.

[6] On the privatisation of Near Eastern postal systems, see: W. Floor, 'The *Chapar-Khāna* System
in Qajar Iran', *Iran* 39 (2001), 257–92, esp. 262–3; *Mukhtārāt min al-qawānīn al-ʿuthmāniyya*,
Beirut, 1990, pp. 139–48, esp. p. 139, §1, where the government stresses that it retains control
over the [Ottoman] '*Barīd*' despite the fact that the general population may use its services;
J. Chardin, *A Journey to Persia: Jean Chardin's Portrait of a Seventeenth-Century Empire*,

factors contributed to the erosion of traditional, pre-modern postal systems and set the chronological limits adopted here accordingly. The phrase 'Islamic world' is slightly more problematic, and the regions and periods of Islamic history that are treated here are not merely those in which the general population or ruling authorities were Muslim. Rather, by necessity only those Muslim states that possessed complex postal systems (excluding e.g. Muslim Spain and Sicily) are covered, and by choice only those regions that were 'Islamic' throughout the formative and classical periods of Islamic history (excluding e.g. South-East Asia and Ottoman Europe) are considered.

The book is divided into three parts. Part I (chapter 1) deals with the postal systems employed in the pre-Islamic Near East, focusing on the East (the Persian empires from the Achaemenids to the Sasanids), the West (from the Romans to the Byzantines), and Arabia (until the Umayyad period). Part II covers the early caliphal phase of Islamic history, specifically the Umayyad (661–750) and early Abbasid period until 847 CE (chapter 2), and the Middle Abbasid period until 1258 (chapter 3), through which the postal systems of the Buyids, Seljuks, Fatimids, Samanids, Ghaznavids, international merchants, and Muslim philosophers are also encountered. Part III considers the postal systems employed in the Near East during the Mongol (chapter 4) and Mamluk (chapter 5) periods.[7]

Parts II and III are referred to as 'Conquest and centralisation – the Arabs' and 'Conquest and centralisation – the Mongols' respectively, as they represent pivotal moments in world history generally and in postal history particularly. When the Arabs and Mongols burst onto the international stage in the seventh and thirteenth centuries, they encountered settled and politically sophisticated states with deeply entrenched administrative traditions. It is well-known that both the Arabs and the Mongols came to draw heavily on the bureaucratic experience of their conquered populations. But what has hitherto eluded scholars is the fact that both conducted centralised campaigns of expansion that relied on express messengers who, moreover, employed techniques of communication that would be integrated into the caliphal and Mongol administrations within decades of their establishment.[8]

(trans. R. W. Ferrier), London, 1996, pp. 39 and 175; and C. Heywood, 'Two Firmans of Muṣṭafā II on the Reorganisation of the Ottoman Courier System (1108/1696)', *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 54iv (2001), 485–95.

[7] I have chosen a chronological approach to the subject (rather than a thematic or regional one) to allow readers to focus on a particular period of Islamic history to the exclusion of others, and to highlight the elements of continuity and discontinuity between periods.

[8] The emergence of a highly centralised Ottoman Empire from a *ghāzī*-movement represents a third and final phase in this process and merits scholarly attention elsewhere. On the Ottoman postal system, see C. Heywood, 'The Via Egnatia in the Ottoman Period: The *Menzilḫāne*s of the *Ṣol Ḳol* in the late 17th/early 18th century', in E. Zachariadou, *The Via Egnatia under Ottoman Rule*, Crete, 1996, pp. 129–44; 'The Ottoman *Menzilḫāne* and *Ulaḳ* System in Rumelī in the Eighteenth Century', in O. Okyar and H. Inalcik (eds.), *Türkiye-nin Sosyal ve Ekonomik Tarihi (1071–1920)*, Ankara, 1980, pp. 179–86; s.v. 'Ulaḳ', in *EI2* vol. X, pp. 800–1; U. Heyd, *Ottoman Documents on Palestine, 1552–1615*, Oxford, 1960, pp. 125–7; Luṭfī Pāshā, *Tewārīkh-i āl-i osmān*, Istanbul, 1341 AH, pp. 371–82; and *Das Asafname des Lutfī Pāschā*, (ed. R. Tschudi), Berlin, 1910, pp. 10–11 (Turkish)/pp. 11–12 (trans.).

4 Introduction

A comparison of the conquerors' techniques of communication in the pre-state phase and an analysis of the subsequent incorporation of indigenous traditions into the two empires' bureaucracies may lead us to adjust our conquest-paradigms for Near Eastern history.

For a book on an aspect of Islamic civilisation, what may seem like an inordinate amount of attention is paid to pre-Islamic institutions, for which the following explanation is offered. To most students and scholars of Islamic history, the period begins in the seventh century CE. There is, for instance, no way of expressing 'before the *hijra*' in Islamic terms. But to rulers of the Islamic world, the Near East that they were inheriting was steeped in traditions and history. In stressing the pre-Islamic heritage of a caliphal institution we are acknowledging that – as with other great civilisations in history – Islamic society did not simply emerge fully formed out of the sands and oases of seventh-century Arabia. However culturally sophisticated Arabia was at the time, one can be certain that it did not on its own equip subsequent Muslim rulers with all the necessary tools for ruling the Near East (as supporters of the *shuʿūbiyya* would point out centuries later). Thus, a detailed examination of the world into which the Arabians swept informs us of the conditions with which the conquerors had to contend and how their predecessors dealt with these conditions.

Accepting the pre-Islamic DNA of Islamic political institutions is not meant to belittle the Muslim achievement; on the contrary, it is the only way to appreciate those aspects of caliphal rule that were truly unprecedented. Whereas generations of Western scholars of Islam have pointed out the pre-Islamic provenance of various aspects of Islamic civilisation as a way of downplaying its originality and contribution to history, the approach here is to compare and contrast a caliphal institution with its antecedents as a way of highlighting those aspects of the *Barīd* that made it unique. Would the Byzantine and Sasanid postal systems have been identical to the caliphal *Barīd* had seventh-century Arabians stayed put? Or, put another way, what (if anything) makes an Islamic postal system 'Islamic'?

These and related questions are of much greater concern to modern historians than they were to pre-modern Muslim authors, and our sources provide information of direct relevance to postal history only sparingly. The *Barīd* was an administrative institution that, unlike most others, had a physical presence in all provinces of the caliphate. Postal stations, station-masters, couriers, guides, milestones, and riding-mounts were widely disseminated throughout a ruler's realms, and even those authors who had little experience of administration in the capital would have been familiar with the postal system's general infrastructure and activities. This, for an historian of the *Barīd*, is the good news. The bad news is that despite (or because of) this widespread familiarity with the system, contemporary authors almost never talked about it. Moreover, perhaps due to the clandestine nature of the *Barīd*'s role in gathering and transmitting intelligence reports, our sources

do not tend to describe this aspect of its activities in detail, if at all.[9] For these and other reasons, there are no classical Arabic or Persian treatises dedicated to the postal system's history, functions, or administration;[10] the closest one gets to a *Barīd*-manual is the genre of caliphal itineraries (*masālik wa mamālik*) often written by and for postal employees.[11] These itineraries provide a gazetteer of the various provinces of the known world and the routes that linked them, but otherwise serve our needs little more than a phonebook serves the needs of an historian of telecommunications.

The shortcomings of our sources are overcome by different means in each chapter, and our historiographic approach varies as a result.[12] Our treatments of the Sasanid and 'Arabian' systems of communication are based on the many references to communications technology scattered amongst literary, documentary, and epigraphic sources in a number of languages that, despite their volume, yield only minimal evidence and tentative conclusions.[13] The Byzantine postal system, by contrast, is described in a range of primary and secondary sources that has no equivalent in Islamic letters until the Mamluk period (1250–1517). In this case, the challenge is to summarise and analyse a disparate amount of information, and relate it to the situation in the Near East on the eve of Islam. Our sources for the early caliphal period (until 847 CE) are relatively descriptive insofar as Arabic chronicles discussing the period make regular reference to the *Barīd* in action. But as most of these chronicles were only composed centuries after the events they purport to describe, it must be assumed that *topoi* and anachronisms taint literary accounts of this postal activity. A handful of *Barīd*-related documents from the period act as a corrective to the literary record and illuminate the picture considerably. The *Barīd* in the Middle Abbasid period (after 847) is repeatedly referred to in a large selection of contemporary literary and documentary sources that, taken together, allow us to arrive at a reasonably detailed understanding of the *Barīd*'s function and structure during this period. The Mamluk *Barīd* and the Mongol *Yām* are described in a wide range of contemporary accounts, many of which were written by administrators or travellers who had direct experience of the postal systems they describe.

Every effort has been made to tease pertinent information from the available evidence for each period, but it is recognised that, as we can only usefully

---

[9] By way of comparison, it is worth noting that in Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* (trans. S. B. Griffith, Oxford, 1963, pp. 144–9) the section on espionage is buried in the book's final chapter (chapter 13).

[10] Ibn al-Nadīm (trans. B. Dodge, *The Fihrist of al-Nadīm*, New York 1970, vol. I, pp. 228–9) mentions that Aḥmad ibn al-Ḥārith al-Kharrāz (d. 258 AH) composed a work entitled *Kitāb shiḥnat al-barīd*, although no such work survives either in modern libraries or in quotations by later authors.

[11] On this genre, see *EI2* vol. VI, p. 639, s.v. 'al-Masālik wa al-Mamālik' (Ch. Pellat).

[12] The sources for each period will be analysed in greater detail in the relevant chapters.

[13] It should also be noted that for the Sasanid and 'Arabian' postal systems there are few secondary sources of which to speak.

6   Introduction

ask questions to which our sources provide answers, we know more about the postal systems employed in some Islamic states than we do about others. Almost inevitably, some readers will deem my use and analysis of the sources to be unduly naïve or sceptical, or otherwise misguided. My approach has been to quote the sources extensively, which should allow readers to make up their own minds on points of detail, and to take refuge in a statement of Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī's, according to whom: 'As regards the *Barīd*, there is disagreement concerning it.'[14]

---

[14] In W. Jwaideh, *The Introductory Chapter to Yāqūt's Muʿjam al-Buldān*, Leiden, 1959, p. 53.

PART I

The pre-Islamic background

CHAPTER 1

Pre-Islamic postal systems

In simple terms, the *Barīd* was a messenger service whose agents delivered messages between a caliph and his provinces. As a general rule, messages from the caliph contained official orders and decrees, while messages from the provinces would consist of reports on the local state of affairs. Thus, messages and messengers were central if not inherent to the functioning of the *Barīd*. Equally important is the fact that messages and messengers are central to Islamic discourse. The Arabic root *r.s.l.* ('to send') is the pivot around which Allāh's communication with man rotates. Scripture, in both its superseded and final forms, was invariably transmitted to humans through the medium of thousands of messengers (*rusul*, sing. *rasūl*) culminating in the mission (*risāla*) of Muḥammad, God's Messenger (*rasūl allāh*). It is therefore of considerable interest to this study that, in spite of the suitability of the Arabic root *r.s.l.*, the name of the messenger system employed by the caliphs was coined from a non-Arab word and that most technical terms used in the *Barīd* were also of foreign origin.

Clearly, the *Barīd* was not a characteristically 'Arabian' institution. Whether the early caliphs incorporated pre-Umayyad Arabian methods of communication into their *Barīd* is debatable and will be examined later on. What is unquestionable is that early Muslims identified their messenger system with foreign, non-Arab cultures, a fact that is spelt out by their choice of such terms as *fayj* ('courier'), *furāniq* ('courier-guide'), *askudār* ('portfolio'), *kharīṭa* (mail-bag), and even *mīl* ('[Roman] mile') and *farsakh* ('parasang') in the *Barīd* service. The pre-Islamic states with which early Muslims had continuous contact were the Byzantine and Sasanid empires, and it is to the postal systems of these states that we now turn.

The East: Iranian postal systems from the Achaemenids to the Sasanids

The Persian post-horse has nine lives. (Ella Sykes)[1]

---

[1] E. C. Sykes, *Through Persia on a Side-Saddle*, London, 1898, p. 309, quoted in Floor, 'The *Chapar-Khāna* System', 286 n. 115.

8   The pre-Islamic background

Introduction

Imperial communications in pre-Islamic Iran are integral to any discussion of the early history of the *Barīd* for two reasons. First, much of the caliphate comprised lands that had previously been under Sasanid rule. Thus, in order to understand the unique conditions that shaped caliphal communications in these lands it is important to understand how earlier rulers responded to the challenges that this region posed to authorities in such a vast swathe of territory. Second, pre-modern Muslim authors themselves attributed the word *barīd* and the institution that it represents to pre-Islamic Iranians. In the words of Ḥamza al-Iṣfahānī: 'Darius the son of Bahmān was the first king to establish postal stations. He set up dock-tailed mounts (at the stations) and they were called *burīda dum* ("dock-tailed"). This phrase was then arabicised and its second half was cut off, leaving the word *barīd*.'[2] Both Ṭabarī and Gardīzī also credit Darius I (r. 522–486 BCE) with this innovation,[3] while Thaʿālibī adds that Darius ordered postal mounts' tails to be docked as a distinguishing sign (*ʿalāmatan la-hā*).[4] By far the fullest account of the process through which the *Barīd* mounts came to be docked in pre-Islamic Iran is provided by Yāqūt. He writes:

The post-horses (*khayl al-barīd*) were called by this name because messengers from certain parts of the realm of a king of the Persians were delayed on their way to him. When they finally came before the king he enquired of them as to the reason for their tardiness. The messengers complained of the governors they had passed along the way and of their failure to assist them. Whereupon the king caused the governors to be brought into his presence in order to punish them. But the governors pleaded that they had not known these men to be the king's messengers. Thereupon the king commanded that the tails and the manes of the messengers' horses be docked as a sign for those they passed, so that they would remove any obstacles which might hinder their progress. Thus, people came to say [in Persian] *burīd*, that is to say, docked. This word was later arabicised, hence the expression *khayl al-barīd* (post-horses). And God is the most knowing.[5]

From these accounts three points are clear: first, medieval Muslims held that postal systems were an Achaemenid-Persian invention;[6] second, postal mounts were distinguished from ordinary mounts by their docked tails (and manes), and this feature of the mounts was supposed to allow royal couriers to proceed unhindered from station to station; and third, this custom of

---

[2] *Taʾrīkh sinī mulūk al-arḍ wa al-anbiyāʾ*, Berlin, 1921–2, p. 28.
[3] Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh al-rusul wa al-mulūk*, Leiden, 1879–1901, vol. I, p. 692; Gardīzī, *Zayn al-akhbār*, Teheran, 1969, p. 16.
[4] This idea is expounded by other authors, including Zamakhsharī (*al-Fāʾiq fī gharīb al-ḥadīth*, Hyderabad, 1906, p. 42) and Zubaydī (*Tāj al-ʿarūs min jawāhir al-qāmūs*, Kuwait, 1970, vol. VII, p. 418).
[5] In Jwaideh, *Yāqūt's Muʿjam al-Buldān*, p. 54 (translation modified).
[6] Ibn al-Faqīh, however, believes that it was the founder of the Sasanid dynasty, Ardashīr I (r. 224–41), who first created a *Barīd* and docked the tails of postal mounts (*Kitāb al-buldān*, Leiden, 1888, p. 198).

docking the tails of postal mounts is the origin of the Arabic term *barīd*. Despite the weight of the authorities cited, we shall see that all three of these points are incorrect. But what is worth bearing in mind here is that for early Muslim writers the story of the *Barīd* begins in Ancient Iran, and we, too, shall begin there.

The Achaemenid '*Barīd*' and its legacy

There is little doubt that complex and well-organised postal systems served rulers in the Near East long before the Achaemenids came to power in the sixth century BCE.[7] However, due in part to the detailed testimony of contemporary Greek authors (and the lack of similar accounts from earlier periods), it is only from the Achaemenid period (559–330 BCE) that we have clear descriptions of such systems. Our earliest source for this institution is Xenophon, who treats the postal system in his biography of Cyrus the Great (r. 559–529 BCE). In his words:

We have observed still another device of Cyrus to cope with the magnitude of his empire; by means of this institution he would speedily discover the condition of affairs, no matter how far distant they might be from him: he experimented to find out how great a distance a horse could cover in a day when ridden hard but so as not to break down, and then he erected post-stations at just such distances and equipped them with horses and men to take care of them; at each one of the stations he had the proper official appointed to receive the letters that were delivered and to forward them on, to take in the exhausted horses and riders and send on fresh ones. They say, moreover, that sometimes this express does not stop all night, but the night-messengers succeed the day-messengers in relays, and when that is the case, this express, some say, gets over the ground faster than the cranes. If their story is not literally true, it is at all events undeniable that this is the fastest overland travelling on earth; and it is a fine thing to have immediate intelligence of everything, in order to attend to it as quickly as possible.[8]

From this account we learn that the purpose of the postal system was to 'have immediate intelligence of everything in order to attend to it as quickly as possible'. We also learn that the system was based on relays of horses stationed at one-day intervals at stations manned by officials who would receive a letter and send it off with fresh riders on fresh horses. Despite Xenophon's well-known admiration for Cyrus and his achievements, there is little reason to

[7] Cf. S. Meier, *The Messenger in the Ancient Semitic World*, Cambridge Mass., 1988; J. Kinnier Wilson, *The Nimrud Wine Lists*, London, 1972, pp. 57–60; G. H. Oller, 'Messengers and Ambassadors in Ancient West Asia', in *Civilizations of the Near East, III*, (ed. J. M. Sasson), New York, 1995, pp. 1465–73; T. Bryce, *Letters of the Great Kings of the Ancient Near East*, London, 2003, esp. pp. 60ff.; N. Na'aman, 'The Distribution of Messages in the Kingdom of Judah in Light of the Lachish Ostraca', *Vetus Testamentum* 53 (2003), 169–180; and A. Wagner (ed.), *Bote und Brief: sprachliche Systeme der Informationsübermittlung im Spannungsfeld von Mündlichkeit und Schriftlichkeit*, Frankfurt am Main, 2003.

[8] Xenophon, *Cyropaedia*, (trans. W. Miller), Cambridge Mass., 1968, vol. VIII, vi: pp. 17–18.

10   The pre-Islamic background

question the veracity of this passage, and the basic outlines of the Achaemenid
postal system are confirmed by Herodotus' often-quoted account:

Now there is nothing mortal that accomplishes a course more swiftly than do
these messengers, by the Persians' skilful contrivance. It is said that as many days
as there are in the whole journey, so many are the men and horses that stand along
the road, each horse and man at the interval of a day's journey; and these are
stayed neither by snow nor rain nor heat nor darkness from accomplishing their
appointed course with all speed. The first rider delivers his charge to the second, the
second to the third, and thence it passes on from hand to hand, even as in the Greek
torch-bearer's race in honour of Hephaestus. This riding-post is called in Persia,
angareion.[9]

Apart from the absence of the station-master (in this account the riders
interact directly), Herodotus' description demonstrates that the system was
still in existence during the reign of Xerxes I (r. 486–465 BCE), and that it was
called (in a Greek rendition) *angareion*.

The postal system during the reign of Xerxes I is also described in the
Biblical *Book of Esther*. While the historical details of the *Book of Esther* are
difficult to verify,[10] it would appear that a swift messenger system connecting
all provinces of the Persian Empire was at the disposal of the ruler. In this
case, the system was used not to gather information about provincial affairs
but to send royal decrees throughout the realm. Thus, when Hāmān secured
the King's permission to kill the Jews of the empire, 'Letters were sent by
courier to all the King's provinces with orders to destroy, slay and extermin-
ate all Jews' (*Esther* 3: 13). When, through the efforts of Mordecai and Esther,
the King agreed to spare the Jews, 'Letters were sent by mounted couriers
riding on horses from the royal stable. By these letters the King granted
permission to the Jews in every city to unite and defend themselves ...'
(8: 10); thus 'the couriers, mounted on their royal horses, were despatched
post-haste at the King's urgent command; and the decree was issued also
in Susa the capital' (8: 14).[11]

In this case, the Achaemenid postal system was employed to circulate royal
decrees throughout the provinces of the empire, using riders 'on horses from
the royal stable'. The English translation of these verses is deceptively read-
able and cannot be seen as loyal to the complexities of the original Hebrew
text. For instance, the term *aḥashtranīm* (*Esther* 8: 10, 14) used to describe the
royal mounts has conveniently been ignored in the English version. In fact,
this word is a *hapax legomenon* and has generated exegetical controversy,

[9] Herodotus, *Histories*, (trans. A. D. Goldey), Cambridge Mass., 1963–9, vol. VIII: p. 98.
[10] Although the Masoretic Text claims to depict events at the court of Xerxes (Hebrew:
Aḥašweroš), most scholars agree that the *Book of Esther* appeared in its final form only
centuries later. Nonetheless, studies have shown that numerous details of the text accurately
reflect an Achaemenid backdrop (e.g. S. Shaked, 'Two Judaeo-Iranian Contributions:
1. Iranian functions in the Book of Esther', *Irano-Judaica* 1 (1982), 292–303).
[11] *Esther* 3: 15 is nearly identical.