

Word Study: Satrapes, or Satrapa

‘Satrapes’ or ‘satrapa’ is a loan word that came from Old Persian via Greek into Latin. As a functional name, it is still part of various Romance and Indo-European languages: such as the English ‘satrap’, the French ‘satrape’, the Spanish ‘sátrapa’, the Italian ‘satrapo’ or the German ‘Satrap’. There it, first of all, refers to a governor of a province under the ancient Persian monarchy. Beyond that meaning that is loyal to its linguistic origin, the satrap was transferred more generally to any “subordinate ruler; often suggesting an imputation of tyranny or ostentatious splendour”, as the OED puts it. Moreover, the same standard English dictionary claims that the sense of ‘domineering person’ appears in Medieval Latin and all the Romance languages.

The Persian root means literally ‘protector of the country’ and referred to a particular office in the Persian governmental system. Since the reign of Darius I (522-486), the empire was divided into provinces. For each of these imperial subdivisions, a satrap was in charge as a governor. They were appointed by the king, mostly members of the royal family or of Persian nobility, gained the juridical power over their provinces, collected taxes, and had to pay in exchange an annual tribute to the king.¹

The functional name appears in the Vulgate and thereby fixes the Persian connotation of the word. However, it is also anachronistically applied in the Book Daniel for the Babylonian empire.

Niemeyer, in contrast, suggests a technical translation as ‘vassal’ and, thereby, shifts the domineering to a subordinate person. Moreover, Armaldi’s dictionary offers

¹ Cf. Encyclopædia Britannica, <http://www.search.eb.com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/eb/article-9065860>.

‘Minister’ as an appropriate medieval translation. Blaise Medieval in contrast reads: “satrapa (satrapes), (cl. et lat. chr.) pl., grands personnages (v. lat. chr.): Turcorum satrapae et majores principes, WILL.-TYR. Hist. 21, 23 - || gouverneur (fréquent au M.-A. dans le style oratoire): PETR.-CELL. Serm. 11 et pass., c. 683 D.” The Medieval Latin dictionaries appear not to agree on the meaning and connotation that the ‘satrap’ carries in Middle Age Latin.

Our online commentary mirrors that dilemma on the occasion of using the word for the first time in line 42: “*Pace* Wieland, it seems likely that here we have the genitive singular [satrapae] referring to Attila (cf. lines 170, 371, 573, 1126), rather than the nominative plural, referring to his immediate vassals, as in lines 136, 278.” Once the *princeps* and once the *princeps*’ very own vassals, the word seems to blur its own meaning. Looking into various translations reveals the fact that in a lot of cases the translations become very ‘free’ around the occurrences of our questionable and ambiguous word.

Let’s choose three different quotes from the Waltharius. The first one from the second group the commentary establish in accordance with Wieland.

Elige de satrapis nuptam tibi Pannoniarum
Et non pauperiem propriam perpendere cures. (vv136-7)

Clearly, the word refers by its plural to a collective of people who are, at the same time, dependent on the speaker’s will and also distinct and accentuated from the average. The first, because the speaker can offer the bride and the latter because it is clearly a valuable award that needs the financial means that are offered alongside. The ‘satrapae’ are noble as the following quotation affirms by its surrounding persons.

Regi ac reginae satrapis ducibus famulisque (v278)

I have to confess that I found it very tempting to translate nearly all lines with the singular use – where the commentary suggests Attila – simply as ‘a vassal’.

Surprisingly, I found it always extremely difficult to figure out who was actually meant. In vers 371, it seems to be Attila indeed.

Tristior immensis satrapae clamoribus inquit: (v371)

But what is he, vassal or *grand personage*? All occurrences in singular number appear to be in the neighborhood of discourses where the power appears to be questionable or at least questioned. Does it fit into the other ironic features of the *Waltharius* that the glorious commander is at the same time a vassal? It clearly reflects medieval vassalage that, according to the LexMA meant also the service of a noble man to the king.

Appendix:

Attila sed celeres mox huc deflectit habenas,
Nec tardant reliqui satrapae vestigia adire. (vv42-43)

Venerat interea satrapae certissima fama [.] (v170)

[...]Hagano, satrapae mox ista superbo // Suggestit [...] (vv573-4)

Laudat consilium satrapa et complectitur illum (v1126)

Lewis and Short

“a governor of a province, a viceroy among the Persians”

“satrapia or satrapea [...] the office or province of a satrap, a satrapy”

Firminus Verris:

SATRAPA .pe - a *satis dicitur - satrape dicuntur sapientes iudices vel reges sive duces et prefecti Persarum et dicuntur satrape quasi satis rapientes