

The Girl Who Danced for the Head of John the Baptist

One of the most famous Levantine incidents of the first century AD was the peculiar circumstances of the death of John the Baptist, familiar today through countless works of art as well as the drama by Oscar Wilde and the opera by Richard Strauss. These recount how Salome asked for John's head and upon receiving it, was killed. Yet both the play and opera are prime examples of significant modern divergence from the historical record for the sake of artistic impact.

This story--how the daughter of Herodias danced for her stepfather, the tetrarch Herod Antipas, and asked for the head of John the Baptist in return--is the most familiar example of the phenomenon of a young girl dancing for the ruler, often with pernicious results. The story represents the ancient folk-tale tradition of the question that one does not want to answer. In fact, the death of John represents a conflation of these two formulas: the dancing girl and the unfortunate question, events often set at a banquet. The earliest example in classical literature of the latter is the case of the entanglement of the Persian king Xerxes with his brother's wife and her daughter, discussed in detail by Herodotus and having the expected dismal ending (9.109-12). A closer parallel to the death of John the Baptist is the case of the Roman magistrate Lucius Quinctius Flaminus, who in the early second century BC was persuaded by a paramour to behead a prisoner (Livy 39.43.3-4).

What is perhaps most unusual about the death of John the Baptist is the presence of a dancing girl, usually identified as Salome,. Dancing girls had a long tradition in Greco-Roman culture: the best documented are those of the Phoenician-Greek city of Gadeira (modern Cadíz) in Iberia, whose professional services were so respected that the

adventurer and explorer Eudoxos of Knidos took them on his fatal attempt to circumnavigate Africa in the late second century BC (Strabo 2.3.4; Fear 1996: 177-8).

Thus even before Salome allegedly danced for the head of John the Baptist the component parts of the story were in place. Yet this is no reason to doubt the basic outline: that John was unexpectedly killed by the tetrarch, probably at the instigation of his wife, documented in two biblical sources and by Josephus (Matthew 14:3-12; Mark 6:17-29; Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 18.118-19), all written in the last quarter of the first century AD and recounting an event of perhaps the spring of AD 29 (Hoehner 1972: 169-70). The earliest report is probably that of Mark, who reported how John had condemned Antipas because he had married his brother's wife, Herodias. She then wanted John killed, although Antipas disagreed. But on his birthday, Herodias' daughter danced as part of the festivities, and when the tetrarch told her that she could have anything that she wanted, her mother persuaded her to request the head of John on a platter. This was granted and it was given to Herodias. Neither mother nor daughter was mentioned again in the narrative. The version of Matthew differs only in details of wording. Josephus did not record any role by Herodias or her daughter in the death of John, but placed it within the political context of the era and the common fear of the seditious potential of contemporary holy men. What is common to all three accounts is that the daughter of Herodias was neither named nor killed, a significant divergence from the popular image of the story current in modern times. The familiar name of Salome can only be provided from the known genealogy of the Herodian family, which makes it clear that Herodias had a daughter of that name (Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 18.136-7).

Yet Salome's death at the time of John's execution has no authority at all, since she had a later career and became queen of Lesser Armenia and is represented on contemporary local coinage (Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 18.136-7, 20.158; Tacitus, *Annals* 13.7; Kokkinos 1996: 33). The alleged death of Salome only appears in modern times, seemingly first in Oscar Wilde's 1891 play, and reinforced by Richard Strauss' 1905 opera. Like Cleopatra VII, the Salome known today bears little resemblance to her ancient cultural predecessor (Kraemer 2006: 321-49; Roller 149-52)..

Bibliography

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