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## The Old and the Restless: The Egyptians and the Scythians in Herodotus' Histories

Robert J. Hagan  
Bard College, [bob.hagan@gmail.com](mailto:bob.hagan@gmail.com)

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Bard

The Old and the Restless:  
The Egyptians and the Scythians in Herodotus' *Histories*

Senior Project Submitted to  
Division of Language and Literature  
of Bard College

by

Robert Hagan

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York  
May 2011

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## 1. Introduction

Although Herodotus is sometimes known as “The Father of History,” his *Histories* resembles neither our modern histories nor those of his contemporaries in terms of form. Aristotle called his prose “the old strung-along style,” referring to his sentence structure; this epithet is equally applicable to his overall narrative construction of the *Histories*.<sup>1</sup> Rather than just writing a tightly-shaped history of the wars of the Greeks and Persians, Herodotus creates a vast work with both short and long excursuses on the peoples the Persians encounter as they attempt to conquer the known world. These ethnographies, remarking on cultures as different as the Greeks, the Persians, Ethiopians and Indians, are notable for their informative and entertaining anecdotes as well as factual details.

With regard to his digressions, Herodotus devotes the most ethnographic detail in the *Histories* to the Egyptians and Scythians. The size and detail of Books Two and Four implicitly makes his priorities clear, and with both explicit and implicit contrast, he asks the reader to compare these two peoples. These civilizations are both at the edges of the known world, at the edge of civilization. Like some of his contemporaries, Herodotus writes on the differences that emerge from the fact that they are at two extremes (*eschata*) in space, Scythia in the far north and Egypt in the south. From these spatial differences, a great many other insights emerge.

Some of these are clearly factual, others imaginative constructions formed by Herodotus’ sources and his own assumptions about the nature of the world. Some

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<sup>1</sup> Dewald, C. (ed.) *The Histories by Herodotus*, xix.

obvious similarities attract Herodotus, from their wide, desert expanses to their great rivers. These likenesses make possible more comparisons and differences. For example, the common wildernesses of Egypt and Scythia bring into focus the differences of how they each make use of their land.

As much as it is necessary to ask how these two cultures are different and similar, it is just as important to ask what Herodotus chooses to make of their similarities and differences in the first place. What lesson does he wish to impart to the reader? The heart of the narrative is the campaigns of the Persian kings; Herodotus also tells us in his first passage (1.01) that his reason for writing is "to preserve the fame of the important and remarkable achievements produced by Greeks and non-Greeks." Another of his goals seems to be to describe the works of the cultures that the Persians meet on their imperial conquests, but he does not explain why he describes and compares the Egyptians and Scythians at such length.

On a historiographical level, if we look at all the ethnographic material in the *Histories*, it appears that Herodotus wishes the reader to view the world and its peoples in a sort of grid. Scythia and Egyptians are the extremes (in several ways) and other central cultures like the Greeks and Persians fall into place between them. Through comparisons both explicit and implicit of these two opposite cultures, Herodotus gives the reader a framework against which to compare the many other cultures in the *Histories*. We cannot learn the *erga megala* of the Greeks and barbarians without the construction of a grid within which their differences in culture and achievement can be understood.

The first part of this project will focus on the differences and similarities between the Egyptians and Scythians that occur in Herodotus' work. The second part will examine how this contrast helps the reader understand the many other cultures discussed in the book, focusing on the Persians in particular, and what these similarities and differences mean to Herodotus in terms of the *Histories* as a whole.

## 2. Space and Geography

Herodotus is fascinated by Scythia and Egypt partly because of their great rivers, the Ister (Danube) and the Nile, respectively. While Herodotus, an Eastern Greek, was certainly exposed to rivers, the Nile and Ister must have been of interest especially to the mainland Greeks, whose land suffers from a dearth of rivers. Herodotus provides his audience with ample information, ranging from a detailed geological history of the Nile to a detailed survey of the five rivers that flow into the Ister. The two rivers are the ties that bind the two cultures, on a global scale. Herodotus uses information from knowledge of the Ister to posit the location of the source of the Upper Nile. In reality the sources of the Nile would not be truly discovered until the 19th century, and not in the place he locates them. Because of his belief in geographical symmetry, Herodotus places the flow and source of the Nile to the west, flowing into the Sahara and terminating somewhere in Algeria, as a mirror image to the Ister.

How does Herodotus come to this conclusion? He supposes that, since the Nile empties in the same latitudinal location as the Ister, they have the same length and direction, mirroring each other. While no modern scholar would make a geographical statement based on such reasoning, Herodotus' logic was essentially supported by the knowledge of his time. Maps in the sixth century, particularly Ionian ones produced by Anaximander and Hecataeus, looked to symmetry to make sense of the world.<sup>2</sup> While Herodotus does not accept these simplified world views on the whole, for instance rejecting the widespread idea of a shield-shaped continent surrounded by one ocean (*ôkeanos*), he does embrace some tenets of symmetry in the mechanics of the world, as proven in his theory on the Nile's sources.

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<sup>2</sup> J Romm, *The Edges of the Earth in Ancient Thought*, 34.



In his view, there are several spatial links between Scythia and Egypt. Besides their latitudinal alignment, Herodotus cites their equal distance from Asia Minor, which acts as a separator between them (2.34). So, the Scythians and Egyptians are aligned laterally, but they also fall at opposite geographic extremes. Scythia is situated at the far north of the known European continent, and Egypt at the far south.

Beyond these northern and southern points, according to Herodotus, lie mythic creatures, strange peoples, and finally emptiness (*eremoi*). Herodotus cites reports by the Issedones, who live far east of the Black Sea, that north of them live gold-guarding griffins and a race of one-eyed men called the Arimaspians (4.27). To the south and west of Egypt are various tribes characterized by a markedly different stance on gender roles and sex than most civilizations. For example, when a man of the Nasamonian tribe gets married, his bride has sex with all the guests, who in turn give the couple gifts (4.172). Herodotus describes the men and women of the Auseë tribe: "rather than living in couples, their sex life is like that of herd animals" (4.182). There exist also "enormous snakes, dog-headed creatures, headless creatures with eyes in their chests" (4.191). Beyond the areas inhabited by such oddities lie geographical obstacles; in the north are "mountains...so tall that they form an insurmountable barrier" (most likely the Altai mountains), and in the south lies the Sahara desert. The antipodal placement of these civilizations on the fringes of the world certainly must have sparked Herodotus' interest in comparing them, and led to many other comparisons based upon their being countries of "extremes".

One of the most striking extremes would be that of climate. In the case of Scythia, Herodotus describes an "intolerable frost" that takes up eight months of the year, with constant rain filling the rest (4.28). He also reports snow that falls so thickly that the Scythians call it "feathers that fall continually on all sides...which shut out the view" (4.07). This would be a

truly dreadful prospect for any Greek used to mild weather almost year-round, and certainly befitting a distant end of the known world. It is true that the rainfall patterns of the Eurasian continent east of the Black Sea are quite different than those of the Mediterranean civilizations, where it hardly ever rains in the winter and is quite dry in the summer. Herodotus even writes that “there is no fairer region in the whole known world” than Ionia (1.140).

In climate, the Egyptians experienced conditions opposite from the Scythians. Egypt is "one of the hottest places in the world," and the sun there is powerful enough to evaporate the Nile. As opposed to the overbearing winter of the north, inland Libya, just beyond Egypt, is "in the grip of constant summer" (2.25). The implications of such extreme weather on the populations of Egypt and Scythia are manifold, as we shall see shortly.

When discussing Egypt's geography, Herodotus spends a significant amount of energy on what we might call scientific explanation. He is perplexed by the science behind the Nile's flow, particularly the fact that it floods in the summer, unlike most known rivers, which flood in the winter. He states three extant theories on why the Nile floods in the summer, and then debunks them. However, he turns to Egypt's powerful sun as the reason, citing its powers of evaporation, and its drift across the across the sky because of storms. While we now know this to be false, Herodotus' powers of reasoning are admirable and his arguments well organized.

Herodotus also associates the idiosyncratic behavior of the Egyptians with their different climate and river. He writes that “Just as the Egyptians have a climate peculiar to themselves, and their river is different from all other rivers, so, too, have they instituted customs and laws contrary for the most part to those of the rest of mankind” (2.35). He notes several examples of customs that are opposite to those of the rest of the world; they write from right to left, keep their

animals in the house, and urinate differently from most peoples (2.35-36). By Herodotus' logic, the sun, which causes the extreme heat and the Nile's peculiar flooding pattern, is linked with the backwards behavior of the Egyptians. The link can sometimes be causal as well. Applying his thinking to fauna as well, Herodotus explains that in Scythia, the winter is so harsh that the livestock there do not grow horns, whereas in Libya, they "grow horns shortly after birth" (4.29).

For Herodotus, a people's condition comes from their surroundings. Given the nature of scientific information in Herodotus' time, it is not surprising that he manages to link so many facets of Egyptian and Scythian life to their extreme climates. It would be natural from a Greek perspective to believe that such opposite behavior would result from their strange, harsh (and relative to those of their neighbors, static) climate. Herodotus was certainly not alone in his inferences. The famous physician Hippocrates, a contemporary of Herodotus, equated the non-differentiation of seasons in Scythia and Egypt with a general "uniformity of resemblance" amongst their peoples.<sup>3</sup>

The hot climate seems for Herodotus to inspire complacency and inertia in the Egyptian people. He believes that their geography allows them to gather their crops with incomparable ease because of the Nile (2.92-94). While not made explicit, his emphasis on the reliability of their food source and stable climate indicates that their subjugation by the Persians is, in part at least, a result of the comfort of their surroundings. When one juxtaposes the wretched climate of the Scythians and their alacrity to uproot themselves to defend their homeland with the rapid

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<sup>3</sup> Adams, F., trans., "On Airs, Waters, and Places." 199.

surrender of the Egyptian kingdom, it seems that Herodotus might have intended a link between geography and national character.<sup>4</sup>

### *Wilderness*

Egypt and Scythia are alike in their vastness. While they contain some continuously populated areas, much of both countries is *erêmos*, empty space. Although we know now that there were other civilizations far beyond these lands, to Herodotus and others, the wildernesses at their borders were essentially the ends of the populated world. Concerning what lies in the far north, Herodotus "cannot get information from anyone who claims to have firsthand knowledge" (4.16).

Regarding the use of their land, each race makes a distinctly different choice: one cultivates crops, the other lives in the saddle and on their wagons. How do they reach these divergences? In the case of Egypt, Herodotus relates the story of the legendary king Sesostris, who upon bringing back prisoners from war, sets them to work digging extensive canals. In doing so, he makes horses and carts useless in Egypt (2.108). Under these conditions nomadism would become impossible, even if it were desired. Sesostris also divides up the land into square plots for each man, effectively creating a permanently sedentary people (2.109). By binding themselves to the land, the Egyptians reject the wandering that the desert fosters in favor of economic development and stability.<sup>5</sup> The great monuments of Egypt, requiring much money and a permanent labor source, are a testament to their sedentary, even fixed nature (2.35).

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<sup>4</sup> Lateiner, D., *The Historical Method of Herodotus*, 159.

<sup>5</sup> Lloyd A.B., *Herodotus: Book II*, vol 3, 31.

From the very beginning of Herodotus' narrative on the Scythians he contrasts them with the Egyptians in their management of settlement. His first ethnographic note therein describes how the Scythians blind their slaves and employ them in milking horses (4.02). This is a far cry from the great works the Egyptians extracted from their slaves, from canal digging to the construction of the pyramids. Lacking the fixed structures to house slaves, the Scythians blind their prisoners to work to support their way of life, which reflects their firm entrenchment in nomadism. And while there are Scythians who practice agriculture, "the crops they cultivate are for them to sell, rather for their own consumption" (4.17).

The way they both use the land in time of war is also a point of contrast. Scythian history begins (in one version given by Herodotus) with the Scythian invasion of Cimmerian territory. Faced with this incursion, Herodotus tells that "the opinion of the general populace would be for them to leave and not run the risk of staying for the sake of what was no more than dust" (4.11). This foreshadows the confrontation with Darius, which concludes similarly with flight through the countryside. The ability to flee rather than engage is only possible for a nomadic people, and Herodotus gives it high praise, writing "For when men have no established cities or fortresses but are still house-bearers and mounted archers, living not only by tilling the soil but by cattle rearing and carrying their dwellings on wagons, how should these not be invincible and unapproachable?" (4.46).

The Egyptians, however, embrace the land, and cling to it when confronted by Cambyses' army. After losing in pitched battle, they "shut themselves up in Memphis" (3.13), rather than regrouping or fleeing into Upper Egypt. This is because they have much to lose, their farms and cities, by retreating through their land. Moreover, it is evidence of an inability to properly mobilize in defense of their country. This deficiency proves to be their downfall, as Cambyses

eventually takes Memphis and the Kingdom of Egypt. We will later discuss this idea and how it reflects the national character of Egypt.

### 3. Time and Origins

The two civilizations at the extreme poles of the ancient world were one of the newest and the oldest, as explained by Herodotus. The Scythians and Herodotus agree that their people are "the youngest in the world" (4.05), and while their tribal history is difficult to track, it is probable that they had only entered Herodotus' world by the 8th century.<sup>6</sup> The Egyptians on the other hand go to substantial lengths to establish their supreme oldness, as Herodotus tells in the anecdote about the shepherd and the two children (2.02). In an effort to find out if the Egyptians or the Phrygians are the oldest peoples on earth, the pharaoh Psammetichus orders that two infants be put in an isolated hut, cared for by a shepherd who provides them with milk from she-goats, but otherwise shut off from human language. When one of the infants' first word turns out to be "bekos," the Phrygian word for "bread," he concludes that the Phrygians are the oldest race in the world (ignoring how close "bekos" sounds to the bleat of a goat!). So, Psammetichus settles for the Egyptians being the second oldest. The Scythians and the Egyptians are cultures of two different generations, the former emerging into history only in the iron age, and the latter's history stretching far back into the bronze age; they are separated in development by thousands of years. This dichotomy underlies much of Herodotus' text and is present in all aspects of their civilizations from laws, culture, and geology to the general uses of storytelling.

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<sup>6</sup> Szemerényi, O. "Four Old Iranian Ethnic Names," 5.

*The Old and Stable vs. the Young and Restless*

Herodotus sets up a temporal template for his ethnographies by remarking on each culture's place in time very early in its respective section. In Book Two, the author begins his ethnography of Egypt with the “bekos” anecdote, entailing Psammetichus' desire to find out who is world's truly oldest race (2.02). There is no dispute that the Scythians are the youngest people in the world, as Herodotus notes early in Book Four (4.05).

He follows this information with examples of Egyptian learning and wisdom accumulated over their many years, as told to him by Egyptian priests. They list their invention of the 12-part calendar year, one Herodotus believes to be better than the Greek system (2.04). The priests also tell him that the Greeks got the names and characteristics of the twelve gods from the Egyptians, who were the first to "assign the gods altars, statues, and temples and to carve figures on to stones" (2.04). Herodotus accepts the supreme antiquity of the Egyptians, shown in how readily he accepts the Egyptian claim to have created the Greek pantheon. This is one of several references throughout the work on how Egyptian culture influenced Greek culture. According to Herodotus, the shield and helmet also came from Egypt (4.180), and modern art history shows the influence of Egyptian architecture and art in Greece (e.g. the Greek kouros).

Whereas Herodotus believes that the Egyptians have influenced much of Greek culture and society, he sees the Scythians as relatively isolated from and impervious to this sort of exchange; thus the Greeks feel free to project their myths onto this new people, to them a cultural blank slate. So the Black Sea Greeks tell Herodotus the tale of how Heracles came to what is now Scythia. In the story, Heracles comes to Scythia on the way to the next of his famous labors, and encounters a woman, half human and half snake, who takes his horses and prevents him



from leaving without having sex with her. In order to get back his horses, he agrees to bear her children, one of which is destined to found the line of Scythian kings and the rest of their race (4.08-10). This tale told by the Greeks is an insight into their conception of Scythian otherness and possible inferiority, since they claim it is Heracles, the Greek hero who has founded a large number of cities, who gives birth to the Scythian race. In doing so, the Greeks establish a hegemonic claim of sorts over the less civilized Scythians<sup>7</sup>. For them, the hero is even responsible for the only wonder (besides its rivers) in Scythia: a forty-inch imprint in a rock known by the inhabitants as the footprint of Heracles (4.82). Given that these are the reports of the Black Sea Greeks and not the Scythians themselves, Herodotus' remarks here seem an all-too blunt expression of the Greeks' creeping intrusion into Scythian cultural past.

Herodotus' examinations of time extend to the realm of geology as well, and he is very interested in the geological history of the Nile and its surroundings. He suspects that Egypt was once a gulf like the Red Sea, and that like Egypt, the Red Sea may silt up in thousands of years (2.11). It seems very probable that he was investigating in person, as he examines minute details such as shells in the mountains and the features of different soils in the Middle East (2.12). Herodotus examines the history of the Nile because it has supported a civilization for thousands of years, but he does not do the same for the rivers of Scythia, because they are neither as vital to the shape of Scythian culture as the Nile is to the Egyptians nor as historically relevant. Herodotus does study the Ister and its neighboring rivers, but his writing remains strictly in the present. He enthusiastically describes the quality of the fish and drinking water of the Borysthenes (Dnieper) River, but does not write about the geological history of the Black Sea region except to state its boundaries and measurements (2.85). It sounds like he is seeing it for

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<sup>7</sup> Hartog, F. *The Mirror of Herodotus*, 26.

the first time; Herodotus' voice when discussing the Scythians reflects his view of the Scythians as new, and thus without a significant history.

### *Time and Timelessness*

How does a civilization mark time? The easy answer would be that they do so through their histories, but unfortunately, many civilizations throughout time have not kept a formal history. The *Histories* gives an excellent comparison of one civilization well recorded through time and another scarcely recorded at all. Egypt has existed for thousands of years, and shows ample evidence for this. The priests show Herodotus records of the 341 generations of Egyptian kings and high priests, depicted in wooden statues. Herodotus makes sure to state that none of the kings of these generations were gods or heroes, carefully distinguishing here at least between history and myth (2.142). Although his figure of 11,340 years of dynastic rule is certainly not in line with modern historical records, it is made clear that Egypt is very ancient and long-lasting; the priests tell him how throughout the lifetime of Egypt, "twice [the sun] rose from the place where it currently sets, and twice it set in the direction where it currently rises. They told me that nothing in Egypt was altered at these times- nothing growing on the earth or living in the river was any different, and there was no change in the course of diseases or in the ways people died" (2.142). Essentially, the priests convey that the Egyptian kingdom transcends shifts in the cosmos.

The Egyptians' record keeping, in its meticulousness and secularity, surely had a great effect on his desire to write the *Histories*. In an age where myths and legends were used to explain human events, Egypt's history had real people who lived and died and whose exploits

were set down into papyrus and stone. Not even the Athenians, who recalled the mythical hero Theseus as one of their kings, and Cecrops, a half-serpent man as their founder, could say the same. For Herodotus, to see such tangible attention to the passage of time that formed the past must have been inspiring.

There is little such temporal inspiration from the Scythian culture. In fact, the Scythians' lack of reliable recorded history seems to have inspired the fabrication of stories. In the absence of history, Herodotus gives us four different origin stories, three of which are clearly myth (4.08). He does make a point of singling out the most reliable origin story, which is that of the Scythian invasion of the Cimmerians, when the Scythians themselves have been pushed out of Asia by the Massagetae (4.11). Compared to the mythical origin stories Herodotus rejects, these movements of nomadic peoples seems closes to the truth in our eyes as well. It is the closest thing to a backstory of the Scythians that appear in *The Histories*. Other than this vague retelling, the Scythians lack a historical past discernible by Herodotus.

While their nomadic way of life leaves little trace, the great exception to their lack of permanent evidence of civilization is their graves. The visible structures left behind by the Scythians before Herodotus' time are their burial mounds, most of which were for royalty. These *kurgans*, which modern archaeologists have excavated, confirm Herodotus' facts; they testify to the presence of a female warrior culture<sup>8</sup> and the Scythian affinity for hemp.<sup>9</sup> They also reveal an interest in posterity greater than Herodotus' reading of their nomadic culture would suggest. Although their society has no permanent settlements or buildings, the Scythians do not overlook the caretaking of their royalty into the afterlife. Herodotus writes (and modern archaeology

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<sup>8</sup> Rolle, R., *The World of the Scythians*, 88.

<sup>9</sup> Dewald, C. (ed.) *The Histories by Herodotus*, 652.

confirms), that the Scythians did take great measures to honor their royal dead, filling their burial mounds (some rising over 20 meters high<sup>10</sup>) with over 50 of the king's attendants, and many of their golden possessions (4.71).

Still, these modest mounds, although filled with riches, pale in aesthetic comparison to the pyramids and necropoleis which tower above the Egyptian desert. The desire to have one's name remembered fueled these great monuments until it became economically unfeasible to build them.<sup>11</sup> Clearly, the pharaohs succeeded in their quest to be remembered in history, but their pyramids did not necessarily secure a good reputation for them. When Herodotus relates the details of the building of the pyramids, it is within the context of discussing two hated rulers, Cheops and Chephren. The priests tell him how Cheops closed their sanctuaries, halted all sacrifices and forced the people to work on the pyramids (2.124), and that “The Egyptians loathe Chephren and Cheops so much that they really do not like to mention their names. Instead they say the pyramids belonged to a shepherd called Philitis, who at this time used to graze his flocks on the same land” (2.128). While Herodotus is nonetheless impressed with the technical achievement of Egyptian monumental architecture, because he writes on it in detail, he also knows how obsession with posterity sometimes has its price.

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<sup>10</sup> Sulimirski T. and Taylor T., "The Eastern Mediterranean and the Black Sea." 550.

<sup>11</sup> James, T.G.H., *An Introduction to Ancient Egypt*, 178-89.

#### 4. Food and Health

So far, we have talked about how Herodotus contrasts the Egyptians and Scythians in terms of space and time, two lofty and intangible concepts. No less important are more tangible concepts, one of which is the food these cultures eat. Food plays an interesting role in *The Histories*. Herodotus treats the foods eaten by his subjects as indicative of their level of civilization, from the savage cannibals to the dogmatically dieted Egyptians. As with many cultural traits, distance from the “civilized world” plays a part in how diet is viewed. The food one eats is perhaps even seen as a gauge of morality. This section will also examine the health habits of the Egyptians and Scythians, which again reveal their nature. The dichotomy of food and health of the Egyptians and Scythians is one of overcivilization and undercivilization, although it should be noted that these are not synonymous with “good” and “bad” in the *Histories*.

As in other sections, Herodotus structures Book Four by briefly continuing the narrative of Persian conquest, here by Darius, before beginning a long ethnography of the Scythians. He starts with the predominant tribe, the Royal Scythians, and then fans out through the other, more distant surrounding tribes. His Scythian ethnography begins with the description of the use of blind slaves to milk their horses (4.02). This passage is as much an introduction to Scythian nomadism as it is to their diet. They were well-known enough for this activity to be referred to as *hippemolgoi*, mare-milkers, by Homer in the *Iliad* (13.5). In his ethnography he shows how dedicated the Scythians are to their milk-based diet, extracting the milk through an elaborate process of forcing the mare’s udder to descend, then milking the udder, and finally stirring and separating the milk (4.2). The passage demonstrates the horse’s extreme importance to the Scythian culture, being both their major food source and their primary mode of transportation,

which is of course vital to a nomadic way of life. They also drink wine, both recreationally and in their rituals, and are prone to overdrinking. It is the cause of their downfall as masters of “all of Asia” when the Medes rise up, invite the Scythians to a feast where they drink too much and, in their drunken stupor, are killed by the Medes (1.106).

We will return to the Scythian relationship to wine in much more detail later. Herodotus does not mention much on the health habits of the Scythians, but he does point out their affinity for cannabis. Although they surely enjoyed the intoxicating elements of smoking such substances, as the Massagetae did (1.202), Herodotus emphasizes other features of the ritual. After throwing cannabis seeds on hot coals, “the seeds emit dense smoke and fumes, much more than any vapour-bath in Greece. The Scythians shriek with delight at the fumes. This is their equivalent of a bath, since they never wash their bodies with water. Their women, however, pound cypress, cedar, and frankincense wood on a rough piece of stone, and add water until they have a thick paste which they then smear all over their bodies and face. This not only makes them smell nice, but when they remove the paste the day after they turn out to be all clean and shining” (4.75). His description of this Scythian ritual evokes imagery of a culture that looks to a Greek observer very primitive and wild.

For the Egyptians, the Nile fills the role of the Scythian horse, acting as both their main highway (since its canals make roads less possible, 2.108) and the source of their sustenance. Much of Egyptian diet was based on bread and beer, both of which originate from the grain cultivated banks of the Nile. It is where they gather their staple wheat, known as emmer (*olura*) (2.36). It is also where the *lotos* water-lily grows, which the Egyptians use for their seeds and roots to bake and eat as a cheap source of food (2.92). Finally, some Egyptians who live in the marsh eat just fish (2.92). The Egyptians show their high level of civilization by excluding

certain foods from their diet, many on religious grounds. For instance, the Egyptians are very phobic when confronted with swine. If an Egyptian “just brushes against a pig, he goes to the river and immerses himself there, clothes and all” (2.47). Herodotus has before in Book One divided civilizations into those who eat a wide variety of foods and those who eat just what is available. When Croesus is preparing to attack the Persians, a *sophos* advises him not to, stating that “Their food consists of what they can get, not what they might want... They drink no wine, just water, and figs are the only good things they have to eat...what will you gain from them?” (1.71). Like the Lydians under Croesus, Egypt too knows the feeling of abundance of choice; the Scythians would be closer to the Persians in this comparison, with their diet consisting mostly of milk-products and boiled meat.

Herodotus writes that the food of the Egyptian priests is considered sacred, and they abhor the eating of beans, which Lloyd suggests is because of their tendency to cause flatulence: “[beans] were considered unusually efficient demon-carriers and obviously to be avoided by purity-conscious priests.”<sup>12</sup> Food, for the Egyptians, determined social status. The priests are very well taken care of; they are “provided with a generous daily allowance of beef and goose-meat” (3.27). They are not allowed to eat fish (a food seen as impure), but they receive donations of wine, a rare luxury afforded only to the elite in Egypt.<sup>13</sup> The common Egyptian people may have had a variety of foods available to them, but they were certainly not as well-fed as their priests.

Their health habits and medicine also show their sophistication as a civilization. Herodotus declares them to be “after the Libyans, the most healthy people in the world,” due to

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<sup>12</sup> Lloyd A.B., *Herodotus: Book II*, ii. 169.

<sup>13</sup> Lloyd A.B., *Herodotus: Book II*, ii. 315.

their stable climate (2.77). There are apparently “doctors all over the place” who all specialize in single illnesses and parts of the body (2.84). The Egyptians purge themselves for three consecutive days each month, because “they believe that all human illness is due to food causing colic” (2.77). These purgations, coupled with their acute aversion to contact with pigs, and their priests’ shaving their entire bodies to prevent getting lice (2.37), make the Egyptians appear to be a somewhat fastidious, even neurotic people. Whereas the Scythians bathe only in cannabis and never in water (4.75), Egyptians priests bathe in cold water “twice every day and twice at night” (2.37). They are, as Herodotus often says, a very old race, with many *nomoi*, and it is not surprising that their culture is inundated with traditions that seem excessive in complexity, especially compared with one whose traditions seem so primitive.

### *Wine and Milk*

The dichotomy between the peoples that drink wine and those who do not is prominent throughout the *Histories*. The societies that drink wine or beer as their principal beverage are the more central, “civilized” ones, such as Greece, Egypt and Persia. Milk-drinkers are satellites around these countries, and are described as less civilized. They include the Scythians, the Massagetae, and the Ethiopians.

The Egyptians were a culture of beer-drinkers, much like the modern day Germans. All levels of society drank Egyptian beer, which Lloyd describes as “made from barley or wheat and dates...pale, foamy and slightly acidulous.”<sup>14</sup> Egypt had a limited amount of vineyards and wine was mostly imported, but beer was produced from the grain from the Nile. The wine the

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<sup>14</sup> Lloyd A.B., *Herodotus: Book II*, ii. 334.



Egyptians did drink was a luxury of the elite, not because of a lack of sophistication on the part of the Egyptian people, but rather because of the high cost of importation and scarcity of grapes.<sup>15</sup> Despite being a populist beverage, beer did require a modicum of technical processes including cooking, sieving to remove chaff and yeast, and fermentation.<sup>16</sup>

The Scythian diet was, as discussed before, more centered around milk and milk-based foods. These *hippemolgoi* were well-known for this, and it can be assumed that milk took up a dominant role in their daily eating regimen. Wine was also a part of Scythian life, but in a fundamentally different way than that of Egypt or Persia. In Herodotus' account, wine is often used in ritual, such as those rewarding prowess in battle: "Once a year, each provincial governor is in charge of a ceremony that takes place in his province. He mixes a bowl of wine, and all the Scythians who have killed an enemy that year have a drink from it. Anyone who has not managed to do this does not partake of the wine, but sits to one side in disgrace- which is the greatest indignity there is for them. Any of them who have killed large numbers of men are given two cups to drink together" (4.66). This Scythian ritual links wine to blood, and blood to honor. This connection is illustrated even more clearly in their procedure for swearing oaths, which consists of mixing the participants' blood with wine in a bowl and drinking it (4.70). For the Scythians, wine is the symbol of blood and is a part of their warrior traditions, not quite the social lubricant of polite societies like Athens or Memphis.<sup>17</sup> When they do drink wine recreationally, they drink it less diluted than usual, as noted by Herodotus in Book Six, when he discusses the Spartan king Cleomenes. In the passage, the Spartans claim that Cleomenes is driven mad by learning from the Scythians to drink wine undiluted (6.84). From then on, when

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<sup>15</sup> Homan, M., "Beer and Its Drinkers". 85.

<sup>16</sup> Redford, D., *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*, 1.

<sup>17</sup> Hartog, F. *The Mirror of Herodotus*, 168.

they describe drinking stronger wine, the Greeks say, “to drink in the Scythian fashion” (*episkuthizein*). The Scythians, having no longstanding vineyards of their own, are new to wine’s delights, and so they drink too much.<sup>18</sup> Is this because of the savage nature of the Scythian people or because wine is corrupting?

Wine is seen as a civilized drink in *The Histories*, but it is sometimes a mark of overcivilization and decadence. In Egypt, we know that their alcohol of choice was beer, but wine was also drunk, primarily by the wealthy and the priests. In Book One Herodotus links those who drink wine to acts of invasion, corruption and underhandedness. Trying to overcome the Massagetae, Cyrus takes Croesus’ advice to present to them a grand feast with many different foods and “endless flagons of undiluted wine,” after which the Massagetae will overindulge and drink themselves silly and lie vulnerable (1.208). This works because the Massagetae drink milk and are not familiar with wine, and so drink it neat without dilution. After the son of the queen of the Massagetae, Tomyris, is captured, she sends a fiery message to Cyrus: “You bloodthirsty man, Cyrus! What you have done should give you no cause for celebration. You used the fruit of the vine- the wine which you swill until it drives you so mad... I swear by the sun who is the lord of the Massagetae that for all your insatiability I will quench your thirst for blood” (1.212). Cyrus pays the price after the enraged queen of the Massagetae fights a furious battle in which the Persian king is killed. The queen completes her oath subsuming Cyrus’ head in a wineskin filled with blood (1.214). It is a revenge symbolic of Cyrus’ use of wine to trick her people as well as his bloodlust. Hartog writes, “In Tomyris’ eyes, Cyrus the drinker of wine is in truth a drinker of blood, so he will be served blood just as if it were

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<sup>18</sup> Quote from Athenaeus 10.441d in Hartog, F. *The Mirror of Herodotus*, 169.

undiluted wine.”<sup>19</sup> This equation is a grisly illustration of Herodotus’ view of wine as a corrupting drink, not necessarily evil in itself, but used in evil ways.

It is also the drink the Persians, in the reign of Cambyses, bring to the Ethiopians, in the midst of Cambyses’ failed Ethiopian campaign. The Ethiopians are milk drinkers and have never tasted wine. It is the only one of the presents Cambyses’ spies give to him that he finds to his liking. In this certainly fictional account, Herodotus gives the just Ethiopians the trait of milk-drinkers to contrast with the wine-drinkers, the sneaky Persians who are led by their unstable and cruel king (3.20-23). The Argippae are similar to the Ethiopians in this respect. They too are located in the far reaches of the world, and like the Ethiopians, they drink milk, and even seem to be vegetarians, “living off trees” (4.23). They are considered to be very just, are said to be arbitrators for their neighbors, and have no weapons. This is ostensibly because of their distance from more “civilized” peoples and their corrupting influence.

The Royal Scythians who are Herodotus’ main focus in Book Four, drinking both milk and wine, have the complication of being between the Greeks and the Scythian-like tribes of the north. They are not far enough from central civilizations to be ignorant of wine, which, since the Scythians have no vineyards of their own, must have come from the Greeks. They sometimes drink to excess and are not a peace-loving society like the Argippae or Issedones, but they are still at enough of a distance to retain their milk-drinking and simple lifestyle. It leads one to wonder just how long this far-flung nation can remain “uncorrupted” by the civilizing influences of its southern neighbors.

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<sup>19</sup> Hartog, F. *The Mirror of Herodotus*, 167.

## 5. The Role of Individuals

As a historian and “inquirer,” Herodotus is not content to simply list facts and observations about the peoples he encounters in the *Histories*. His chapters are filled with stories of men attempting to defy fate, treacherous people who meet grisly ends, and great conquerors. Many of these stories have probably been embellished or even fabricated by Herodotus’ sources, but they all serve a purpose. Herodotus’ anecdotes focusing on a particular individual are used not only to inject interest and a story line to an otherwise dry passage, but also to provide interpretive commentary that fleshes out the structural differences we have already observed.

In Books Two and Four, Herodotus focuses in on individuals and their actions as representative of greater historical trends. We see how behavior in individuals is construed and dealt with in their home culture. The pharaoh Amasis is a clever ruler with unorthodox ways, as well as a philhellene (2.172-182). Scyles the Scythian too, is different, and immerses himself in Greek culture, a grave mistake in a xenophobic nation (4.78-80). These men serve to highlight the contrasting philosophies of the Egyptian and Scythian peoples when it comes to foreign ideas.

We also see how the kings of Scythia and Egypt control the fates of their nations when confronted by Persian invasion. The basic contrast already drawn is also exemplified in the ways specific Scythian and Egyptian figures act. Idanthyrsus, king of Scythia represents a new kind of battle tactic that shies from traditional honor in favor of survival. His Egyptian counterpart Psammetichus is a relic of the old order, which proves to bring about the end of Egyptian independence.

*The Scythians and Egyptians Encounter the Persians*

As Herodotus writes on the numerous civilizations in the *Histories*, describing their strange diets and *nomoi*, the threat of Persian invasion looms in the background. The majority of the peoples Herodotus mentions encounter the Persians at some point, and when they do, they are usually at war. Cyrus and Cambyses are successful in most of their conquests, but when the Persians under Darius come to demand Scythian submission, fortune is not on their side. The Scythians are not a sedentary people like most great civilizations of the time, and are not as simple to conquer.

Herodotus writes how, under King Idanthyrsus' command, the Scythians forego traditional tactics and embrace their nomadic strengths in order to resist Darius' army (4.120). He sees Idanthyrsus' leadership as the herald of a shift in the contemporary military paradigm. Idanthyrsus' initial response to Darius' crossing into Europe is to join forces with the neighboring tribes to take on the Persians by force. The Agathyrsians, the Cannibals, the Neurians and the Black Cloaks reject his overtures to an alliance on the grounds that the invasion is the Scythians' fault, and thus their problem (4.119). Deprived of reinforcements, Idanthyrsus chooses to lead his people to retreat throughout the land, destroying their vegetation and filling in their wells (4.120).

Darius expects to find towns to pillage and crops to plunder, but he does not know his enemy. The wagons that the Scythians keep as their homes are packed and in retreat. Even the permanent towns in Budinian territory have been abandoned in accordance with the Scythian plan (4.123). The Scythians' nomadism saves their people and confounds Darius, who sends a message to Idanthyrsus: "What is this extraordinary behavior? Why do you keep on running

away, when you could do something different? For instance, if you think you have the ability to resist my power, then stop this aimless wandering, stay in one place and fight” (4.126). Darius clearly does not know what to make of these strange tactics that are characteristic of a culture that does not value personal territory or the idea of a town.<sup>20</sup>

As well as sending divisions to attack foraging Persian troops (4.128), Idanthyrsus leads his men, with Darius in close pursuit, through the territories of the tribes that refused his alliance in order to draw them into fighting (4.125). The chaos that is stirred within these territories proves the Scythian plan to be correct, given that most of the non-allied tribes choose to flee north, just as the Scythians have done all along. The scene where Darius finally realizes his folly shows Herodotus at his narrative best. Finally drawn up in battle, the Scythians choose instead to chase after a hare, proving to Darius their contempt for the Persians and displaying their uncatchable nature (4.134).

Herodotus sees the Scythians as an exemplar of sound military strategy. He makes no secret of his admiration for their tactics, writing, “Although in other respects I do not find the Scythians particularly admirable, they have come up with the cleverest solution I know of to the single most important matter in human life. The crucial thing they have discovered is how to prevent anyone who attacks them from escaping, and how to avoid being caught unless they want to be detected” (4.46). Indeed, the tactics of the Scythians are new and effective, and they demonstrate that the Persians *can* be defeated, even with inferior numbers, by evasion and surprise.

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<sup>20</sup> Hartog, F. *The Mirror of Herodotus*, 51.

As Francois Hartog has pointed out, Scythian strategy foreshadows the Greek experience in their war against Xerxes much later in the *Histories*<sup>21</sup>. After the Greek allies are overrun at Thermopylae, they struggle to decide their next course of action. Themistocles leads the evacuation of the Athenians from Attica onto the nearby island of Salamis instead of raising a defense of the city (8.41). The Athenians then lure the Persian navy into calamitous defeat in the straits of Salamis (8.86). Idanthysus' leadership of the Scythians parallels that of Themistocles and the Athenians. Themistocles too leads a tactical retreat of his entire people, saving them from slavery and pillage. However, unlike the Scythians, the Athenians do have homes, which are destroyed after the Persians sack Athens. To make the analogy as strong as Hartog does would be overreaching, but Herodotus does implicitly form a tie between the cleverness of the Scythians under Idanthysus and the clever maneuvers of Themistocles.

### *Age and Tactics*

The Scythians, being a “new race,” have a fresh outlook and do not hold to the many traditions of their more ancient neighbors. Herodotus depicts them as inventive and clever. The Egyptians *have* been around for a long time, but Herodotus shows that their long-cultivated wisdom does not necessarily aid them in fending off the Persian onslaught. Their venerable and trusted traditions actually work against them in the Battle of Pelusium.

Egypt at the time of Persian ascension is characterized by its economic and artistic prosperity but also by its declining power in foreign affairs. The crushing loss against the Babylonians at Carchemish in 605 BC begins the dwindling of Egyptian influence over the

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<sup>21</sup> Hartog, F. *The Mirror of Herodotus*, 55.

Middle East<sup>22</sup>. Amasis, an extraordinary figure whom we will discuss soon, represents the last gasp of the greatness Egypt once had. By the time Cambyses has finished his preparations for war against Egypt, Amasis II has died, leaving his son Psammetichus III as pharaoh.

Psammetichus is inexperienced as a ruler, having been pharaoh for only six months at the time of his defeat at Pelusium. Herodotus remarks of a rare rainfall in Thebes upon Psammetichus' succession; this is clearly a bad portent for the king (3.10). The portent is fulfilled when, after a lengthy battle, the Egyptians are defeated and "fled from the battlefield in disarray and shut themselves up in Memphis" (3.13). Psammetichus' retreat to the capital spells doom for the Egyptians, as the Persians are practiced in siege warfare, not with towers but with clever stratagems. Herodotus has already demonstrated their adeptness at reducing cities in Book One, when Cyrus drains the river running through Babylon, thereby gaining access to the city and conquering the Babylonians (1.91). Memphis surrenders not long after being besieged, and Egypt falls to the Persians.

With the defeat of Psammetichus, Herodotus illustrates the idea that the tactics and strategies that the Egyptians have used for thousands of years to protect themselves are no longer applicable. To hide behind the city walls is found not to be a viable option when faced with the overwhelming numbers of the Persians, who are often able to outwit a besieged enemy. Psammetichus' failure is a warning to the Greeks: if the Egyptians cannot withstand a conventional assault on their cities, the less-powerful Greeks certainly must choose alternative tactics. This threat is quickly heeded by the neighboring Libyans, who immediately accept tributary status under the Persians after the Battle of Pelusium (3.13).

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<sup>22</sup> James, T.G.H., *An Introduction to Ancient Egypt*, 75.



### *Philhellenism*

Herodotus closes the ethnographies of the Egyptians and Scythians with the tales of two men: Amasis, pharaoh of Egypt and Scyles, king of Scythia. What ties these two kings together is their mutual love of Greek culture. While both Egyptian and Scythian societies are opposed to adopting foreign customs, the stories of Amasis and Scyles bear very different endings. By focusing on the events surrounding these individuals, Herodotus gives us insight into the mind of the Scythians and the Egyptians, and how they view their neighbors.

Amasis, who dies six months before the dissolution of Egyptian independence, can be considered the last great king of Egypt. As a commander under his predecessor Apries, he comes to power when he is sent to suppress a group of rebels but instead realizes his position to take power for himself, and defeats Apries in battle (2.162-9). Herodotus depicts him as clever and different from his predecessors. Amasis defies the tradition of a royal monarchy by being born an ordinary citizen, and he is, at the beginning of his reign, hated by the people for this reason. In order to sway their opinion, he presents them with a gold statue of a god. He reveals that this was once his foot-bath used for his bathing and purgations; like the footbath, he was once common but now should be venerated and respected (2.172). His heterodoxy is most prominent in his philhellenism, which takes form in his construction of Naucratis, a trading city that he sponsors to attract Greek settlers (2.178-80). He also marries a Greek wife from Cyrene (2.181).

For a society as old and respected as the Egyptians, philhellenism would be a rare phenomenon. Herodotus describes the Egyptians as being very wary of adopting foreign customs, which can be ascribed to their perceived pride and sophistication. After all, why would a nation that believes itself to give the Greeks their gods, their calendar system and the armor

they wear (2.04), need to learn anything from the Greeks? However, there are signs that this sentiment was not universally held. Herodotus uses *touto phulassousi* to say that the Egyptians are careful not to observe foreign ways, giving the sense that there is a need to restrain oneself from doing so (2.91). This seems to imply that there might be an underlying desire among the people to explore the ways of the outside world, but they are prevented from doing so due to social pressure or state law.

Whatever the reasons the Egyptians had for their xenophobia, Amasis rejects them outright. Herodotus has already established Amasis as an unconventional king (2.172-4), and his philhellenism puts him over the top. However, Amasis' love of all things Greek is portrayed as nothing but beneficial for Egypt, as Naucratis is the first trading center in Egypt and grows to be a vital city. It is so important that, "If someone fetched up at any of the other mouths of the Nile, he had to swear that he had not done so deliberately, and then after making this statement under oath bring his ship round to the Canobic mouth" (2.179).

Herodotus' passages on Amasis are filled with praise for the philhellene king, so why does philhellenism go so wrong for his Scythian counterpart, Scyles? The differences we have observed between the two cultures will ultimately help us to answer the question. Scyles is born to a Scythian father, the king, and a Greek mother, who teaches him Greek. He has a natural inclination towards things Greek, and is not content with the newness and simplicity of Scythian culture, so he slips away occasionally to the Borysthenite city of Olbia, near the Black Sea (4.78). While at his Greek residence, an ominous lightning bolt burns down his house as he performs a Bacchic ceremony. This is an especially grievous offense given that the Scythians loathe Dionysian worship because "it is unreasonable to seek out a god who drives people out of their minds" (4.79). A Greek witness to Scyles' ritual runs off to the Scythians, and tells them of

their king's transgression. Upon hearing this, the Scythians, led by Scyles' brother, rise up against him. Scyles flees to the Thracians, who turn him over, and upon his return to the Scythians, he is "beheaded on the spot" (4.80).

If we are looking at two societies that are equally averse to outside culture, why is Scyles killed by his own people, while Amasis is by all accounts remembered as a great king? Herodotus indicates that it is a question of how each people thinks about patriotism. Before going on to talk about Amasis' philhellenism, he speaks of his many contributions to Egyptian society, including large, grand sanctuaries of Egyptian gods, improved grain output from the Nile, and writing good laws (2.176-7). The old, well-established culture of the Egyptians welcomed his contribution. Scyles, on the other hand, forsakes the culture of his homeland for that of foreigners, marries a local Greek woman (4.78), and performs ceremonies abhorrent to Scythians, such as the worship of Dionysus. Moreover, Scyles' lack of interest in Greek rather than Scythian mores is an indication of his "sickness" as a king.

According to Herodotus' sources, if the Scythian king becomes ill, diviners are sent for, who, using rods, "identify one of their fellow countrymen- [who] has falsely sworn by the king's hearth" (4.68). If another set of diviners agrees on the judgment, then the defendant is beheaded and his property divided amongst the diviners. This process exhibits the Scythian belief that the morals of their country are evident in the body of the king; in other words, if the country falls to depravity and infidelity, the king becomes sick. In the case of Scyles, the king is both the "patient" and the "perjurer." His own sickness of the brain, evident in his Bacchic frenzy, co-

occurs with his betrayal of Scythian *nomoi* when he sneaks away from his country to live as a Greek. So, he is killed as the Scythians kill their enemies: by beheading<sup>23</sup> (4.64).

As Herodotus ends his Egyptian and Scythian ethnographies with the stories of Amasis and Scyles, he again tacitly encourages us to compare the highly civilized nature of the Egyptians and that of the relatively under-civilized Scythians. The unfortunate king Scyles is essentially slain because the simplistic and conservative laws and character of his homeland dictates that he die. While the Scythians may have fresh ideas concerning warfare because of their newness, they are also depicted as overly fearful of outside ways. The Egyptians on the other hand, are sophisticated enough to accept foreign ideas (albeit from a safe distance), but they are also too self-assured of their conventional wisdom to change tactics when necessary. Even on the individual scale, Herodotus shows these contrasts to have great consequences on each society.

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<sup>23</sup> Hartog, F. *The Mirror of Herodotus*, 131.

## Part II: 6. Introduction

Herodotus' ethnography of the Persians is slight. He writes only nine chapters on the customs of the Persians, compared to the entire books he devotes to the customs of the Egyptians and Scythians. While it is true that the central thread of the Persian Empire's expansion does give the reader details of Persian culture along the way, they are few and far between. It is therefore clear that Herodotus intended to frame the Persians in a different way than the Egyptians and Scythians. Whereas those two civilizations illustrate the sometimes extreme differences from Greek culture, the Persians are not so different from the Greeks, despite their assertions to the contrary. They drink wine, and even practice pederasty, which Herodotus mentions that they learned from the Greeks (1.135).

The Persians are not an extreme culture from the Greek perspective. Their climate is mild and they have customs that are not unrecognizable to Greek observer. While their ethnography is short, Herodotus spends a great deal of time on Persian history, and this is what determines the Persian character throughout the *Histories*. He focuses on the kings and various characters in the Persian world, rather than the daily activities and curious traditions of the common people. The tensions facing the Persians as they transcend their nomadic origins towards their status as a superpower are reflected in these characters.

This chapter will place the Persians in the grid we have created consisting of the Egyptians and Scythians, in order to examine their culture as compared with those that are deemed to be extremes. We will seek to discern the Persian role in the *Histories* as a people surrounded by one culture that is arguably "overcivilized" and another that is "undercivilized."

## 7. Cyrus and Median Origins

As the first Persian king, Cyrus is the model by which all later kings measure themselves. He sets a precedent for rapid and substantial territorial expansion, and so we see his successors attempt to live up to his legacy and make their own mark by conquering new lands. In order to determine Persian identity in Herodotus' narrative, it is instinctual to look to their first king. Cyrus' origin story in the *Histories* show that he is born to be royalty. In Book One, we see how Cyrus as a child stands out from his peers by his kingly demeanor; he delegates tasks to his playmates and even doles out corporal punishment (1.114). However, the core of Persian identity, their imperialism, lies earlier than Cyrus' ascension. It is not only his innate royal nature that brings about the nascent Persian identity, but rather the actions of his Median predecessors that set forth the norms of the Persian royalty.

Herodotus posits that the source of the ubiquitous Persian imperialism in the *Histories* lay in Median practice, which is then passed on to Persians once they are conquered. Herodotus' narrative on Cyrus' origins begins farther back with the story of Deioces, a man chosen by the Medes to govern them. His achievements in establishing a strong monarchy are later seen incorporated into Persian imperial culture; the establishment of a grand royal space (the palace at Ecbatana) and the difficult privilege of seeing the king are mirrored in Darius' construction of Persepolis and his closing off his residence to Intaphrenes and his old comrades (1.98-9; 3.118). The Median association with empire is strong enough that Tomyris, queen of the Massagetae addresses Cyrus as "king of the Medes" (1.206). When Greeks submit to the Persians demands for earth and water, they are said to "medize" (*mêdizein*).

Rosaria Munson notes that Cyrus' father, a man of non-royal blood, is determined by Astyages to be a man "of peaceful behavior," as denoted by the term *êsuchiê* (1.107). She points out that "as a public term, *êsuchiê* denotes a lack of the kind of political and military activism that is typical of individuals or states with ambition to rule like the Median kings."<sup>24</sup> By virtue of the "miraculous nature of his birth" (1.204) and his kingliness as a child, Cyrus is apparently destined to be a king, but imperialism must still be learned from his Median predecessors. It is not until he is convinced to do so by the Median Harpagus that Cyrus ponders taking the crown for himself (1.125).

It is difficult to determine whether historically the Persians were truly inspired by a Median model in the establishment of their centralized kingdom. While Herodotus draws this connection, the idea of a tightly controlled Median state is not supported by archaeology or by modern study.<sup>25</sup> However, their imperialist connotation cannot be denied, as such links as the term "medize" establish a clear idea in the Greek mind of aggressive Median character.<sup>26</sup>

The many invasions undertaken by the Persians are thus seen by those that are attacked as an extension of Median foreign policy. However, Herodotus presents the motif of Persian expansion not just as a continuance of Median practice, but also that of the Lydians. The first full-scale invasion undertaken in the *Histories* is done by Croesus, king of Lydia against the Persians. In Book One, Croesus sets out to check Persia's growing power under Cyrus (1.46). Crossing the Halys River, he attacks the Persians, against the advice of an advisor named Sandanis. His unnecessary attack on a people from which they have no riches to gain ends in the destruction of his empire. A pattern of failed invasions of uncivilized lands is thus established

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<sup>24</sup> Munson, R., "Who are Herodotus' Persians?", 460.

<sup>25</sup> See above n. 21.

<sup>26</sup> Graf, David., "Medism: The Origin and Significance of the Term", 18.

throughout the *Histories*; it is begun by the Lydians and inherited by their new overlords the Persians. When Cyrus attacks the Massagetae it is because of his overconfidence stemming from his miraculous birth and good fortune in war, much like Croesus' false assurance of an oracle that is favorable to his campaign (1.75). Even Croesus' advice and presence does not prevent Cyrus' defeat, and his same experience is repeated.

### *Rivers: The Final Frontier*

As we have seen, Herodotus shows how the Egyptians and Scythians treat the land in their own particular style, the former digging into the soil to grow crops, and the latter using it to graze and to their military advantage. As integral parts of their geographies, their respective great rivers, the Nile and the Ister, also help define the character of their cultures. A sedentary, agricultural society, the Egyptians rely completely on the Nile to feed them. The Scythians too find the Ister and other rivers useful for their meadows for cattle-grazing, fishing, and drinking water (4.53), but do not rely on them nearly as much to sustain their nomadic way of life.

The way Herodotus shows the Persians' dealings with the land, and particularly rivers defines the Persian character as well, in a way very different from the Egyptians and Scythians. As the belligerent in many wars of conquest across Eurasia, Herodotus makes it clear that Persian culture encourages war and imperialism. Aside from his Persian ethnography, Herodotus frames the Persians primarily as conquerors, and this is thoroughly supported by their encounters with rivers. Rivers, rather than nurturing and enriching, are often obstacles to imperial conquest, and like the peoples the Persians intend to subjugate, rivers as natural obstructions are overcome with the same aggression.



Even before we see the Persian response to the rivers they encounter, we can observe how Herodotus portrays rivers not only as physical obstructions, but also as political boundaries. In the *Histories*, Herodotus makes it clear that much peril lies in crossing these boundaries. His first mention of such boundaries occurs right away in Book One, in which he writes that Croesus' empire consists of all the people that live west of the Halys, a river that cuts across Anatolia southwards, then loops up in an easterly direction. (1.06). He fatefully crosses the river with his army in order to head off the Persians before they become a threat, his confidence bolstered by a prophecy that tells him that a "great empire will fall" if he goes to war (1.53). Croesus' subsequent destruction at the hands of Cyrus' army is a powerful foreshadowing of the dangers the Persians will face as they cross river after river to reach their foes, pushing past boundaries that should not be passed.

This foreshadowing is realized in the invasion of the Massagetan lands (1.204). When Cyrus is preparing to bridge the Araxes River, the Massagetan Queen Tomyris offers them the option of fighting either on her soil or to fight on Persian land, either way saving them the trouble of bridging the river. At first, Cyrus and his fellow Persians see no reason not to fight on their own soil and not bother with the construction of bridges. However, Croesus convinces him not only to cross the river, but to trick the Massagetae and slaughter them, a tactic we will discuss soon. And so it is after crossing the Araxes, that Cyrus is killed and his army destroyed (1.205-214). The Araxes river acts as the barrier between life and death as those who are remain behind escape the carnage of Cyrus' defeat. Croesus and the nobleman Hystaspes, father of Darius, both "crossed the Araxes and returned to Persia" (1.210).

Confronting another river, Cyrus gives us the first example of a Persian trademark throughout the *Histories*, that is using technology to harness natural forces. Their approach is

marked by a cunning craftiness, *sophiê*, which is not necessarily a term of admiration.<sup>27</sup> The Persians use such craft to aggrandize the image and power of the crown within their own lands, and on their own people. Herodotus describes a Babylonian queen, Nitocris, who in order to protect her city against the rising Median empire, diverts the river to build a defensive structures and a bridge, then lets the water fill to its original bed (1.185-6). When Cyrus comes to besiege Babylon, he does the same engineering, instead letting his troops sneak through the drained riverbed into the city, neutralizing the Babylonians (1.91). The close juxtaposition of these two rulers' engineering of the same river brings the marriage of craftiness towards nature and war into focus. This union will come to define the character of the Persians throughout the *Histories*, as one of determined and crafty militarism.

We see this *sophiê* take on a vengeful quality in an incident that is mirrored several times throughout the *Histories*. Before he reaches Babylon, Cyrus comes to the Gyndes River and upon their arrival, one of his sacred horses charges into the river and drowns. He is so enraged by this that he warns the Gyndes directly that he will “reduce its strength to such an extent that in the future even women would easily be able to cross it without getting their knees wet” (1.189). Having “abandoned his expedition against Babylon” he spends the entire summer digging canals and dividing the river into 360 channels, and resumes his campaign. The detail Herodotus shows in the separation of the river greatly overshadows the subsequent battle outside Babylon, which consists of a single sentence. The episode is illustrative of the Persians' all-consuming desire to dominate and conquer, extending to the natural world as an end result. The desire for vengeance Cyrus exhibits when the Gyndes, of its own volition “submerged [his horse] in its current and swept it away” is comparable to that of Tomyris when her son kills himself as Cyrus' prisoner

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<sup>27</sup> Romm, J., “Herodotus and the Natural World” in *Cambridge Guide to Herodotus*, 189.

(1.213). His separation of the river is also an egregious violation of their reverence for rivers stated in Herodotus' ethnography (1.138) and his first marking of distance of the Persians from those *nomoi*.

### *Persian Ethics 101*

Although Cyrus preaches hardiness once his empire is established (9.122), he also embodies the paradox of rule himself, since he uses the promise of a soft life in order to seize power. Harpagus' message to Cyrus convinces him to bring about a rebellion of his fellow Persians against their Median lords (1.124). He accomplishes this by ordering his tribesmen to cut through an especially rough patch of field in one day, and the next day he treats them to a feast consisting of the best food available. Once they are done eating, Cyrus asks them whether they enjoyed the first day's activity or the second. After they all agree that the feasting was far more to their liking, he gives them a choice: rise up and free themselves from slavery, so they can live as on the second day without breaking their backs, or to remain as they are, toiling forever. The Persians join Cyrus in his rebellion with alacrity (1.126).

The allure of riches is indeed difficult for everyone to resist, but Herodotus demonstrates that the Persians are especially prone to giving in to luxury by virtue of their willingness to "adopt more foreign customs than anyone else" (1.135). Presumably not long after conquering the Medes, they began to wear "Median clothes because they consider them to be more attractive than their own, and they wear Egyptian breastplates for fighting" (1.135). Even though the Persians "have the least respect for those who live furthest away" (1.135), Persia is known for its incorporation of the best of all parts of its empire (e.g. the wide use of Phoenician warships).

Their adaptability initiates the beginning of a new identity. They are internationalist and are sophisticated in that way, but not like the Egyptians, whose sophistication comes with centuries of learning. Pasargadae, the first capital of the Persians, had no pyramids or great temples, but under the reign of Darius I, the Persians did have Persepolis, a new city notable for its grand palatial structures and ornate gateways. As a symbol of their new power, it was formidable, but as a cultural center it could not compare to the great cities of Egypt. Their international, luxurious character overshadows the culture of men who from ages five till twenty “study only three things: horsemanship, archery, and honesty” (1.136).

They even go so far as to import the myths of the Greeks. Rather than claiming to have had integral part in shaping the pantheon of gods as the Egyptians do (2.04), or being subject to Greek projection of their myths like the Scythians (4.8-10), the Persians assert their own interpretation on the Greek mythological program. The *Histories* opens with the Persian perspective on the ultimate Greek saga, the Trojan War, and they even adopt Greek myths in order to claim that it was the Phoenicians who began the series of abductions leading to the events of the *Iliad* (1.01-05). It is no surprise that the Achaemenids, who throughout the *Histories* attempt to impose their rule over Europe, would not stop at military hegemony, but go on to cultural hegemony as well. Moreover, this importation suggests a lack of heroic traditions of their own<sup>28</sup>.

The beginning of many betrayals of the Persians’ most cherished aversion to lying begins with the acceptance of foreign influence by those they have conquered. The Persians are first exposed to lying in the *Histories* while Cyrus is on campaign against the Massagetae (1.204-14). When given the choice of fighting in Massagetan territory and their own, the Persians

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<sup>28</sup> Munson, R., “Who are Herodotus’ Persians?”, 467, see n.46.

unanimously agree to wage battle in their own land. Croesus, however, interjects with a plan that their army will leave a great feast with undiluted wine, and when the enemy are drunk and full, they will slaughter them (1.207). The successful fulfillment of this plot marks a point of divergence for the Persians from a people who by instinct opt for a straight fight rather than use trickery, as they do here initially. The fact that this idea comes from Croesus demonstrates the compromising of Persian values that comes with exposure to other cultures, namely the Lydians, who in their great oldness are well-acquainted with such stratagems. The subsequent destruction of the Persian army at the hands of the Massagetae, a people similar to the ancient Persians pre-Cyrus in their simple ways, is perhaps as much a consequence of their willingness to adopt new ways as it is a result of Cyrus' hubris.

## 8. Cambyses: Days of Wine and Roses

When Cyrus is killed in his war against the Massagetae, Cambyses accedes to the throne. Like his predecessor, he is a king against which other kings might measure themselves, but as a cautionary example. Herodotus, who usually refrains from outright judgments of his subjects, plainly states his opinion that Cambyses is insane and an alcoholic several times in Book Three (3.30, 3.37). He exhibits wanton cruelty towards humans, as in the taunting of the Egyptian king Psammetichus, and even animals in his stabbing of a calf sacred to the Egyptians (3.14; 3.29). His behavior does stand out amongst the Achaemenids in the *Histories* as exceedingly crazed and mean and it is tempting to write it all off as an anomaly of nature. However, in between the instances of violence and extraordinary despotism particular to Cambyses' personality, we can see intimations of the larger theme of the changing Persian identity. To sift out the latter will be our goal in this section.

When we left the subject of the Persian relationship to wine (see p. 21-23), we had seen the use of alcohol as a tool to take advantage of and subjugate foreign peoples. In Book Three we see a continuance of this idea of wine as separating the civilized from the less civilized. When Cambyses' dignitaries approach the Ethiopians with the goal of preparing for an invasion, they bring gifts, one of which is palm wine. Of the gifts given to the Ethiopian king, the wine is the only one that pleases him, and is deemed "the one thing the Persians did better than them" (3.22). Cambyses' personal affinity for drinking aside, the encounter with the Ethiopians shows the reader how far the Persians have advanced since their initial classification by Croesus' advisor as water-drinkers, eating only what can be gleaned from their poor earth (1.71). They are now the proliferators of the beverage, and seem to be pretty good at making it as well, judging by the Ethiopian king's positive reaction. The meeting with the Ethiopians serves as a benchmark for

their progress so far, which shows (as discussed before in Part 1) that the once unsophisticated Persians have now become corrupters. Cambyses' attempt to entice the Ethiopians and thus weaken them in the manner of Cyrus and Deioces fails against this ignorant but noble people, proving that not every society is susceptible to the adornments and luxuries of "civilized" life.

### *The Madness of King Cambyses II*

In Cambyses' tenure as king we see an extension of the Persian rejection of their adherence to the *nomos* of never lying, our first glimpse being Croesus' initial introduction to the Persians of lying in his plot to trick the Massagetae (1.207). The theme reemerges as Herodotus describes the "mad acts" committed against Cambyses' subjects. At one point, Cambyses asks his messenger, Prexaspes what his people think of him. Prexaspes tells him without any apparent hesitation, 'Master, they have nothing but good to say about you except in one respect: they say that you are rather too fond of wine' (3.34). Cambyses responds in a predictably angry manner, saying "In fact the Persians are saying that my fondness for wine is driving me mad and making me lose my mind." He then proceeds to prove his sanity the way only an insane person would. He shoots Prexaspes' son, Cambyses' own wine-server, straight through the heart with an arrow, his shot establishing in his own mind just how mentally capable he is. The unfortunate boy receives his death because of his father's reluctance to lie and omit the well-known truth of Cambyses' alcoholism. Whereas in the Massagetan episode Croesus, a Lydian, introduces trickery and lying to the Persians, Cambyses generates a precedent all by himself for the tacit encouragement of lying and pandering by demonstrating to his court that telling the truth can cost lives.

At first glance the affair might be dismissed as just an example of Cambyses' insanity, however it is indeed the first act of murder in the *Histories* committed against a Persian subject by their king.<sup>29</sup> Again we see the establishment of another unseemly precedent within the Achaemenid reign; one for arbitrary violence that flies in the face of their *nomos* of not executing anyone if they have only been accused of committing only one crime (1.137). While Herodotus' description does indeed give Cambyses' execution of Prexaspes' son the tenor of a capricious, drunken act, it is no more violent or despotic than the several other instances where a Persian king suddenly decides to teach one of his subjects a lesson. In Book Four, Darius orders Oebazus' three sons to be killed (which we will discuss more in the next section) as a means of teaching his subjects that *no* Persians are excluded from the demands of imperial warfare (4.84). While the circumstances surrounding the two events are different, both are exceedingly cruel and arbitrary, since the sons have committed no crimes. Cambyses' dispatching of his wine-server is a harbinger of the emergent practice of exercising deadly imperial power at a whim.

Cambyses brandishes this power over foreigners as well, but according to Herodotus, he suffers as a result. After returning from an abortive expedition to burn down the oracle temple of Zeus in Siwa (in modern day Libya), he sees that the city of Memphis is celebrating in honor of the god Apis, but he believes the jubilation to be in honor of his failure in Siwa. He then sets about insulting the Egyptians in various ways, the most grievous of which occurs when he is presented to the calf god Apis. He mocks the living god, aiming to stab him in the stomach but misses and hits the thigh. The cow succumbs to his wounds and is buried secretly (3.29). He even dares to open ancient tombs to see the corpses inside, makes fun of and then burns the statues in the temple of Hephaestus (3.37).

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<sup>29</sup> This does not include the acts of violence made against his family members, including his wife and brother.



Cambyzes' assaults on Egyptian culture are especially shocking in light of Herodotus' emphasis on the great importance of religion to the Egyptians in Book Two.<sup>30</sup> Like his brutality towards his court, Cambyzes' manic destructive behavior towards his foreign subjects foreshadows similar instances later in the *Histories*, done in less egregiously sadistic fashion. In the reign of Xerxes we will see the destruction of the temples on the Athenian acropolis, an act that, while logically understandable, is nevertheless brutal and offensive. Given the difference in capability and legacy between Cambyzes and his successors, it might seem unnatural to draw connections between them, but the madness and caprice that fills Cambyzes' reign should not disguise the fact that he does establish precedents for imperial behavior, all of them negative. The Achaemenid trajectory set by Cyrus is deeply complicated by Cambyzes' conduct and gives the first hints at a Persian identity that seems increasingly despotic and arbitrary.

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<sup>30</sup> Dewald, C. (ed.) *The Histories by Herodotus*, 634.

## 9. Darius: Retailer or Master?

From the unstable and sometimes tragic Cambyses, we move on to Darius, whom Herodotus presents as an improvement in almost every way from his predecessor. One of the most well-known Persian kings, he is recognized by Herodotus and modern historians as an extremely capable administrator and tolerant ruler (3.89). Cambyses, as we have seen, fails in both those aspects, being negligent in administrative duties and showing contempt for the customs of his foreign subjects (3.16; 3.29). Darius seems to possess some of the best qualities of Cyrus, such as his organizational talent, and his ability to command armies, which is demonstrated in the quickness with which he puts down the rebellions that emerge in the power vacuum after Cambyses' death.<sup>31</sup>

Administrative capability is one of Darius' strongest qualities, one that Herodotus makes clear in his listing of the satrapies and tribute payments that comprise the Persian Empire (3.89-96). Darius' restructuring is in fact a necessity in order to run the expanding (and often rebelling) Persian provinces. We see the consequences of unconsolidated territory in Book Three when the Magi seize power in Cambyses' absence. While Cambyses is "spending his time in Egypt insane," the steward of the household, a Zoroastrian priest and a Mede, usurps the throne (3.61). The ease with which this pretender and the Medes take power indicates, at least in the version of events Herodotus knew, that the Persians did not yet have an established system of accountable, responsible government. As Herodotus presents it, Cambyses in his eight-year rule did not spend nearly as much time tending to the affairs of state as he did on military campaign, both successful and disastrous. Following Cyrus' able rule, Cambyses' absence from Persia opens a

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<sup>31</sup> Young, T., "Persia, Greece and the Western Mediterranean C. 525 to 479 B.C." 61-62..

gap in the process of the required consolidation of the empire, one that is duly closed by Darius.<sup>32</sup>

Darius also continues Cyrus' policy of toleration towards his new foreign acquisitions. The Persians break from the oppressive attitudes of the Neo-Babylonian and Neo-Assyrian states and even their predecessors the Medes, and instead use tolerance as a political tool to preserve peace.<sup>33</sup> Their internationalism comes at the expense of their own simple customs and traditions, something the Scythians on the other hand did not lose when they allegedly dominated Asia. According to Herodotus, the Scythians' reign as rulers of Asia lasted for only 28 years, ending because "of their abusive and disdainful attitude" towards their subjects. They would apparently not only impose especially straining taxes on their vassals, but they would harass and steal from them as well (1.106). The Scythians' refusal to adopt, or even tolerate foreign customs undermined their ability to rule others and resulted in their expulsion by the Medes. The reverse is true of the Persians; their tolerance of the Hebrews for instance gained them their loyalty, and even high praise as a savior.<sup>34</sup>

In exchange for their general policy of tolerance, the Persians reaped the monetary and cultural benefits of their many dominions. Herodotus intimates, however, that even if Darius himself was a capable monarch, the trappings of empire had begun to rob the Persian people of their former hardiness. It appears not only in outward displays such as the wearing of foreign dress, but in their behavior. Whereas before Herodotus writes of the Persians using wine to trick others, as in the episode of Cyrus killing the Massagetae (1.211), we see the Persians themselves,

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<sup>32</sup> T. Young in the *Cambridge Ancient Histories* (51) and P. Briant (59-61) determine Cambyses' legacy within classical sources to be an unfair bad press attributed to the king as a result of Herodotus' overreliance on his biased Egyptian sources.

<sup>33</sup> Young, T., "Persia, Greece and the Western Mediterranean C. 525 to 479 B.C." 105.

<sup>34</sup> Young, T., "Persia, Greece and the Western Mediterranean C. 525 to 479 B.C." 103.

beginning with Cambyses himself, coming under the influence of alcohol. When Darius demands earth and water in Macedonia, his delegation is invited to a feast courtesy of King Amyntas and his son Alexander. As the Persians dine and drink profusely, they boorishly demand that the Macedonian women sit with them, fondling them and infuriating the king and prince. Alexander sends away his father and tells the Persian visitors, who are “exceedingly drunk” to have their pick of their women to sleep with. He then finds beardless men to dress as women, sends them into the Persians’ quarters where the “guest-friends” are slaughtered (5.18-20). We can assume that it was not Herodotus’ ideal of hardiness for one to be tricked into being murdered by men dressed as women. These behaviors fit instead Cyrus’ warning of “soft men”; men easily weakened by drink and distracted by lust.

### *Royal Ethics*

Darius’ accession sees a return to stability after his initial seizing of power from the Magi. While his administrative actions and the establishment of regular tribute are regarded by the people as benign (3.89) and his rule is stable, it is evident that even Darius has moved away from the ethical tenets of Persian society as laid out by Herodotus in Book One (1.131-9). Darius’ skill at the financing of government is an ambiguous virtue, however; Darius is described by the Persians a “retailer” since he “puts a price on everything.” By contrast, Cambyses is called a “master” because of his cruelty. Cyrus, described by the Persians as a “father” (3.89), once denounced trading peoples as weak, professing his lack of hear of those “who set aside a space in the middle of their town where they can meet and make false promises to one another” (1.153). To Cyrus, trade is unmanly and unworthy of the Persians. In his

management of satrapies and their assigned tributes, however, Darius has begun to engage in this kind of un-Persian financial activity on a macrocosmic scale. He is known for his unique system of tabulating the income from Persian provinces: “The Persian king stores this revenue of his by melting it down and pouring it into clay jars; then when each jar is full, he removes the surrounding clay. Whenever he wants money, he slices off as much as he needs at the time” (3.97). Darius may be energetic and skillful in his rule, but Herodotus’ tone in describing the Persians’ opinion of their king exudes a sense of their ambivalence towards his character, especially when compared to Cyrus, who “was kind and everything he set up was for their good” (3.89).

Besides the focus on what he sees as a detrimental dedication to trade, Cyrus’ denunciation of trading peoples concerns the lies that are exchanged alongside goods. It is this traditional Persian taboo on which Darius founds his reign. When he and his six companions are plotting to usurp the Magus pretender, there is debate on how to gain entry to the palace; Darius proposes that they simply lie their way in. He justifies this by saying that lying and telling the truth are simply two different ways of achieving the same end, that is to profit, and that people both lie and tell the truth to get ahead. In the maxim “Where a lie is necessary, let it be spoken” (3.72), Darius betrays their vaunted principle of telling the truth (1.38). With this speech, Herodotus seems to be suggesting that even for the gifted Darius, such betrayals are necessary for the maintenance of empire. The noble yet quaint values of a country of nomads cannot be adequately transposed onto a system as complicated and intricate as the Persian Empire.

The death of such values is foreshadowed at the end of Cambyses’ reign, when Herodotus brings back the character Prexaspes one last time to comment on the state of affairs during the Magian revolt. Believing they could sway Prexaspes because of Cambyses’ treatment

of him, the Magi try to convince the messenger to reassure the Persians that they were being ruled by Smerdis, the rightful son of Cyrus (3.74). Prexaspes goes to address the people from a high tower, but ignores the wishes of the Magi and instead recalls Cyrus and his venerable lineage, as well as the great things he did for the Persians. He tells the crowd below how he was forced to kill the real Smerdis by Cambyses' order, and that the Magi had taken power for themselves, and that he was precluded from expressing the truth under the threat of death. With this final praise of Cyrus and an entreaty to the Persians to take back their empire, he throws himself from the tower to his death, a death symbolic of the end of the customs valued in Cyrus' day (3.75).

Darius' own advancement of the use of lying later leads to discord on the domestic front. After the completion of the plot against the Magi, one of the conspirators, Intaphrenes, wishes to see Darius, knowing that, as a rule states, he is allowed to visit unannounced unless the king is having sex with a woman. However, when the guards stop him on those very grounds, he doesn't believe them, and proceeds to maim the guards and has them dragged by his horse. After being convinced that the other conspirators were not involved, Darius has Intaphrenes and all his male relatives executed, except his brother-in-law and son (3.118-9). Intaphrenes' motivation for his action is unclear; Herodotus does not tell us whether Darius was indeed with a woman, or if the conspirator was actually planning to overthrow him. This passage along with others in Book Three is intended to make up a theme of Darius' consolidation of power and suppression of revolts,<sup>35</sup> but the facts surrounding this possible revolt are fuzzy, so it is difficult to tell whether Intaphrenes' rage was justified.

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<sup>35</sup> Dewald, C. (ed.) *The Histories by Herodotus*, 639.

What is clear is that Darius' moral relativity has not sat well with his inner circle, sowing distrust and violence. Again, his swift actions like those against Intaphrenes are the cost of running an empire, but represented on a much more personal level; Darius' wrath has turned from the enemies of Persia, the Magi, to those who helped him obtain the throne. The ruthless execution of Intaphrenes and his relatives is a far cry from the Persian *nomos* praised by Herodotus stating that not even the king can execute someone accused of only a single crime (1.137). The law also says that depending on how many crimes are committed and their seriousness, the king may "give way to anger," but the murder of a trusted confidant and almost all his male relations on the mere suspicion of guilt is enough to suggest that Darius at the beginning of his reign has strayed from the core Persian values delineated by Herodotus.

As I mentioned before, it is tempting to consider Cambyses to be aberrant in the line of kings because of his insanity; however, the behavior Darius exhibits brings him rather close in line with his insane predecessor. Herodotus indicates that the violent conduct of Cambyses is not altogether rejected but is rather internalized by his successors as one of the normal apparatuses of imperial rule. Herodotus communicates this in the repetition of cruel, despotic actions by the Persian kings that follow Cambyses. One may take the example of Darius' dealing with Oebazus in Book Four. Oebazus, a Persian with three sons about to campaign in Scythia, asks Darius if he would let one of his them stay behind as a favor. His request is granted in that Darius slays all three of his sons, indeed leaving them all behind in Susa (4.84). A similar situation occurs when Xerxes is crossing his troops across the Hellespont, and is approached by the Lydian Pythius who generously entertained his troops and offered the king money to finance the war, and in return is honored by the privilege of being the king's guest-friend (*xenos*). Secure in his relationship with the king, Pythius requests that the eldest of his five sons currently in Xerxes'

army may stay at home so he might take care of his father in his old age (7.38). Xerxes, infuriated, rails at him: “How dare you mention a son of yours, when you are no more than my slave, and should follow in my train with your whole household, wife and all?” He orders that Pythius’ eldest and favorite son be bisected and placed on opposite sides of the road, so that the army passes between them (7.39). The echoing of a similar act of a distinctively imperial styled cruelty seems to be a deliberate move by Herodotus to firmly establish in the reader’s mind that such treatment of people who displease the king for whatever reason is now policy.

Herodotus as usual does not offer his direct opinion on even the most grisly and inhumane episodes that he describes. However his intended message is plain: the military power that the Persian empire has come to wield has corrupted them, forcing them to give up their value of due process of justice, which is replaced by arbitrary and often unnecessary death sentences, as the cases of Intaphrenes, Oebazus, and Pythius show. Darius may be one of the bright spots of the Achaemenid Empire because of his gift for governance, but it is not without a price. The corruption that has taken hold of the Persians is apparently incontrovertible, as Xerxes’ reign is marked by even more excesses characteristic of this changing Persian identity.



## 10. Xerxes and Persian Identity

Of the Persian kings, Herodotus devotes the most time to Xerxes and his war against the Greeks. It is in Books Seven through Nine that we witness the clash of Persian and Greek arms and culture which fully fleshes out the character of the Persians; as the end of a novel accomplishes for its main character. The king's behavior and the actions of his entourage form the amalgamation of elements that make up this identity.

In many ways Xerxes' persona is a shadow of his father's perceived greatness; he lacks the vigor and initiative that Darius has shown in his rule. In contrast to Darius' strong-willed pursuit of his goals, Xerxes must be persuaded by Mardonius and the Pesistratidae to invade Greece, surely pushed on by the pressure to expand on his father's empire as well (7.05-08). And even when he has supposedly decided on war, he wavers when faced with the advice of his trusted uncle Artabanus, and is finally convinced by a dream (7.10-19).

Impulse and even instability impact many of his decisions; there is a marked contrast in the reactions of Darius and Xerxes towards Oebazus and Pythius respectively when they request special treatment for their sons. Whereas Darius "replied in a friendly fashion," pretending to indulge Oebazus before teaching him a lesson, Xerxes immediately launches into an angry tirade against Pythius and has his favorite son killed in a conspicuous fashion (4.84; 7.38). But Xerxes is also a sensitive man who is stricken to the point of sobbing at the idea of the shortness of human life when he looks upon his great army, filled with so many young men who will someday die (7.46). It is enough to suggest that Xerxes has been pushed into the role of general and king.

Despite his sensitivity, Xerxes does not retain his father Darius' careful use of tolerance as a political tool. Having occupied Athens and killed the last defenders of the city on the acropolis, the Persians plunder and burn the entire precinct. The psychological effect is such that upon hearing the news, some Athenian commanders on Salamis are eager to return to Athens to defend the city (8.53-56). If the Persians had a chance at forcing the Athenians to treat with them, it was destroyed in the fires on the acropolis.

In the vein of his predecessors Cambyses and Darius, Xerxes seems not to value the truth as useful. Although he accepts advice from his advisors when he is indecisive, as when Artabanus initially convinces him not to invade Greece, it is apparent that, once he makes his mind up about something, he will not be swayed by honest words. In Book Seven, as Xerxes reviews his troops and ships, he approaches Demaratus, the former co-king of Sparta and asks in a seeming moment of doubt if the Greeks will resist his grand army. Demaratus responds, "Would you like a truthful answer, my lord, or a comforting one?" and Xerxes accedes to the former. His answer indeed offers no comfort; Demaratus tells him "the kind of truth that you will not be able to prove false at a later date" that "If there are in fact only a thousand men to march out against you...then a thousand men will fight you." Although he should have been gulping, Xerxes laughs this off and tells him that the Greeks' freedom inhibits them from fighting well, whereas the Persian whip would drive them to excel. Xerxes dismisses the former king: "But you're just talking rubbish from a position of ignorance" (7.102-104).

Cambyses' contempt for the Persian *nomos* of truth-telling results in the crazed murder of his wine-server (3.34); Darius has his co-conspirator and his family executed after he protests the king's secrecy and sets a definitive precedent for royal prerogative over Persian traditions. However, in keeping with the finality that Xerxes' reign represents in the *Histories*, Xerxes'

dishonor of the truth is easily the most consequential, as his discounting of Greek military power and refusal to listen to his most trusted Greek advisors, Demaratus and Artemisia, results in the destruction of the lives of thousands of his men.

### *The Conquest of Nature?*

Xerxes' four years of preparation and single-minded direction of all the empire's resources (as Herodotus' long catalog of arms attests 7.61-99) took a significant amount of determination, with the end goal being of course the submission of Greece. The military imperialism characteristic of the Persians takes various forms, one of the most climactic and awe-inspiring being the episode of Xerxes at the Hellespont, in which *technê* meets *phusis*. However, the notion of Persian military imperialism is an ongoing motif throughout the *Histories* that reaches its apogee in Xerxes' technical achievement of bridging the Bosphorus strait.

The Persian approach at the Hellespont demonstrates again the use of *sophiê*, craftiness, towards their adversaries. The Persians use such craft to aggrandize the image and power of the crown even within their own lands and among their own people. Herodotus describes a plateau in Asia surrounded by a river that once split into five tributaries that supported local tribes. Once the Persians took over the land, an unnamed Persian king blocked up the gorges through which the sub-rivers passed, stopping the flow of the sub-rivers to their former destinations and depriving the tribes of water. The only way the people could receive relief was to plead loudly with the king, who would unblock a gorge and let some water flow until their land was saturated. Then he would close it back up and open the sluice-gates to the next loudest speaker, in exchange for money in addition to their regular tribute (3.117). Herodotus depicts the Persians as

willing to manipulate nature even within their own empire, if it affords more power to the king through money, and in this case, forced supplication. This behavior contradicts the Persian *nomos* that “rivers are objects of particular reverence for them [the Persians], they do not urinate or spit into them, nor do they wash their hands there or allow anyone else to either” (1.38). The unnamed king, a representation of the archetypal Persian ruler, takes ownership of a force that is not rightfully his. Whatever the average Persian might do, their masters did not think of themselves as subject to the traditions of ordinary folk, especially given the apparent existence of a law deeming that “the ruler of the Persians could do whatever he wanted” (3.31).

We may contrast the narrative of the Persian king with the chronicle of Min’s achievements in Egypt, the chief among them being his diversion of the Nile through the mountains, protecting the area of what would be Memphis from flooding (2.99). As the founder of Egyptian civilization, Min ranks high in importance, and so does his act, which allows for the creation of their capital. Later, Sesostris too is credited with the construction of canals that bring water to those farther from the Nile (2.108). Their willingness to reshape nature for the public good contrasts highly with the nameless Persian king who extorts money from his subjects.

On the path to imperial conquest, rivers are an enemy that one cannot kill. However, it is not for a lack of trying on the part of the Persians. Their constant expansion often puts them before treacherous streams, made more difficult by the great masses of men at their command. The Persians put their *sophiê* to use building immense bridges and feats of engineering in order to conquer their foes. Of all similar Persian engagements with rivers, Xerxes’ confrontation with the Hellespont illustrates this theme most vividly. As he sets out with a great army to do what his father Darius failed to, that is to conquer Greece, he finds his efforts to cross the Bosphorus quashed by storms that destroy the bridge he attempts to build. Before executing his engineers,

he orders that the strait be given three hundred lashes and addresses a vengeful speech to the sea, “Bitter water, this is your punishment for wronging your master...King Xerxes will cross you, with or without your consent” (7.35). He then constructs a massive bridge formed by warships tied together by cables, and advances into Europe. Although it is tempting to attribute Xerxes’ irrational rage to his capricious character, we are reminded that Xerxes is behaving as his grandfather did, albeit in a more hubristic manner. The wise Cyrus has performed the same sort of act. Approaching Babylon, the Gyndes River gives Cyrus grief when it drowns one of his prized sacred horses, and so he orders his men to divide the river into 360 channels, allowing his army to cross (1.189).

Whereas Cyrus and his army, however, marched on to victory, Xerxes’ campaign ends disastrously. King Xerxes’ downfall might seem to any reader of Greek tragedy to be the result of his forceful domination over nature, accomplished with hubristic self-confidence. It is certainly made out to be so in literature of the time, as in Aeschylus’ *Persians*, in which the ghost of Darius bemoans his son’s offense against the gods:

My son did this unthinkingly, with a young man’s brashness,  
 He who thought he could restrain the holy Hellespont with shackles  
 Like a slave, and Bosporus the stream of god.  
 He reshaped the straits, throwing hammer-forged bonds around it,  
 Making a great path for his great army.

Though a mortal, he thought he could master the gods - foully planned!-

And master Poseidon. (*Persians* 744-50, qtd. in *Cambridge Guide* 187)

Yet, Herodotus does not seem to exhibit any disapproval towards Xerxes’ “shackling” of the Hellespont. In fact, he stops to describe in detail the marvel that Xerxes has created, expounding on the details of the cables used to tie the ships, and the fence built “to stop the yoke-animals and

the horses looking over it and being frightened by the sight of the sea” (7.36). Herodotus cannot restrain his interest in the technological achievements of his day. As James Romm remarks, “Even when an aggressor nation forces a river out of its channel to expedite an invasion, as the Lydians do at the river Halys - forcing the ambitions of empire to supersede the sanctity of the terrestrial landscape - Herodotus pauses to admire the ingenuity with which the task might be achieved.”<sup>36</sup>

Herodotus has before stated that he will write much about Egypt because of its “remarkable features” (2.35), which include the reconfiguring of the Nile under Min and Sesostri. The *Histories* gives the colossal war projects of the Persians an amount of attention equal to that devoted to the works of the kings Min and Sesostri, which were ostensibly done in the interest of the kingdom, and which Herodotus implies benefited the people. These bridges and diversions of the Persians are *erga megala*, some of the great works that Herodotus sets out to preserve for posterity. Whereas the Egyptians tame nature to organize and vitalize the people, Herodotus shows the Persians to view the natural world as another force to bring under their rule, a conveyance that is integral to the reader’s perception of the Persian character in the *Histories*.

### *Persian Softness*

In Books Six through Nine, we witness the full maturity of the Persian softness that has grown from its initial roots in the time of Cyrus. The Persians’ soft nature, as displayed by the behavior of their elite, is illuminated by its contrast with the hardness of the Greeks. Compared to the Greeks, who subsist on marginally fertile lands and are hounded by the threat of poverty

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<sup>36</sup> Romm, J., “Herodotus and the Natural World” in *Cambridge Guide to Herodotus*, 189.

(7.102), the Persians are decadent in their social customs. There are several instances where this is conveyed by Herodotus. There is an episode in Book Eight in which Arcadian mercenaries desert to the Persian side in the wake of the Greek loss at Artemisium. They are asked by the Persians to explain the Olympic games, and the reward for winning. When the Arcadians respond that the prize is a garland, the son of Artabanus, Tritantaechmes cannot hold back mocking the idea: “Well Mardonius, what sort of men are these you have brought us to fight? They make excellence rather than money the reason for a contest!” (8.26). The Persians are by this time so soft that they cannot perceive of a contest that rewards men purely for their physical prowess. Interestingly, Herodotus writes that Xerxes decries this outburst as the mark of a coward. Xerxes thereby denounces the softness within his empire that he himself represents in the *Histories*.

However, the most explicit demonstration of Persian softness brings us back to the subject of food. In Book Nine, when the Greeks have defeated the Persians at Plataea, the Spartan commander Pausanias comes upon Mardonius’ abandoned camp. Pausanias finds Mardonius’ chefs and tells them to make the kind of meal they would make for their dead master. They prepare a magnificent feast, replete with gold and silver furniture. To amuse himself, he asks that they also prepare a Spartan meal, typically a modest and tasteless affair. Pausanias then shows his men the differing meals: “Men of Greece, my purpose in asking you all here is to show you just how stupid the Persian king is. Look at the way he lives, and then consider that he invaded our country to rob us of our meagre portions!” (9.82). The Persian meal displayed by Pausanias differs greatly not only from the diet of the Greeks, but also from the diet the Persians once consumed early in their imperial history. Croesus’ advisor Sandanis described the diet of Cyrus’ Persians as such: “They drink no wine, just water, and figs are the only good

things they have to eat” (1.71). The ceremonial opulence of a Persian meal is a blunt display of their decadence, and like the Laconic black soup, the Scythian milk-based diet, and the Egyptian avoidance of certain foods, is highly indicative of their national character. The contrast of the deserted Persian camp and the victorious Greeks recalls again the theme of invasion committed against the less civilized, and the futility of such an undertaking.

With Xerxes’ war, the cycle of the soft attacking the hard is completed. It began when Lydia under Croesus, known for the richness of its king and for its luxuries, attack the Persians, who “have nothing” (1.71). The Lydians lose, but the Persians themselves are taken captive by the riches of their subjects, for, as Herodotus states, “before the Persians conquered Lydia, they had no delicacies or anything good” (1.71). As Sandanis correctly predicts, once the Persians have had a taste of Lydian luxury, “they will “cling to them and it will be impossible to dislodge them,” and it is proven in the bloody Ionian Revolt.

We see the same softness of the Persian nobility having infected their king as well. As Xerxes exits the Greek stage after the disastrous Battle of Mycale, we witness the empire’s descent into violent court infighting and sexual affairs at the Persian capital, Susa. Back on Persian soil, Xerxes develops an interest in the wife of his brother, Masistes. Attempting to become closer to her, he arranges for the woman’s daughter to be married to his own son. Instead, he loses interest and begins to woo his son’s new bride, Artaynte, secretly starting a relationship with her. In his devotion to the girl, he asks her what she would want most in the world, promising her anything she desires. To his deep regret, she requests the brilliant shawl Xerxes wears, given to him by his wife Amestris. Failing to convince her otherwise, he relents and gives her the shawl. Learning of Artaynte’s possession of the shawl, Amestris blames the girl’s mother and concocts a wrathful plan for her. At a feast for the king’s birthday, at which no



request can be refused, Amestris asks Xerxes to give her Masistes' wife. He reluctantly accedes and goes to Masistes, telling him that he must give up his wife and wed Xerxes' daughter. Masistes refuses and storms out swearing vengeance. When he returns home, he finds out that his wife has been brutally mutilated, by Amestris' command. He tries to put his oath of vengeance into action by leading a revolt of the Bactrians against Xerxes, but he is found out by Xerxes and killed en route (9.108-113).

The affairs of the Persian court at the end of Book Nine are astounding in their Byzantine nature and their insidiousness. In this late stage of the *Histories*, it is clear that the Persian monarchy is rotting at the core from the actions of its morally ambiguous king, and his overtly sadistic wife. He has accomplished, like Cambyses, the killing of his own brother, as a result of his lustful machinations. The episode of the shawl is in fact the last focus on Xerxes' exploits, and so it ends his story leaving us with a rather bad image of him as a soft man. This image is embodied in his bright multi-colored shawl, a beautiful covering on a feeble figure.

Herodotus reinforces this implicit idea with his explicit opinion in a story he tells about Xerxes and his voyage back to Asia after Salamis. His ship, rowed by Phoenicians, is being hit hard by a storm because of the weight of the many Persian nobles. Xerxes asks the captain of the ship if there is anything they can do to rectify the situation. The captain replies that they must dump passengers in order to lighten the load. In submission, the Persian nobles jump ship, and the vessel carries on safely to Asia. Xerxes then gives the captain a crown of gold in reward for their deliverance, but cuts off his head for causing the death of so many Persians (8.118).

Herodotus rejects this story on the grounds that if it had happened, Xerxes would have asked the Phoenician rowers instead to jump ship, and not the "leading lights of Persian society" (1.119). Here Herodotus snipes at Xerxes for his management of the war, implying that the king would

choose to keep his sycophantic courtiers and relatives rather than the Phoenicians, the expert sailors who could actually direct the ship. As Dewald puts it, “He has in effect seated overdressed and out-of-shape courtiers at the oars of his ship of state.”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Dewald, C. (ed.) *The Histories by Herodotus*, 718.

## 11. Conclusions

Herodotus ends the *Histories* by bringing us back to a moment early in Cyrus' reign, after he has just obtained the crown of the Median Empire. A man named Artembares, the ancestor of an aforementioned Artayctes, the corrupt Persian noble in the time of Xerxes, approaches Cyrus along with some other Persians and tells him that since they have become masters of many men, that they should move to conquer a more prosperous country and live there. Cyrus dismisses the proposal, telling those Persians that they might go if they wish, but that they should be prepared to eventually become slaves, "on the grounds that soft lands tend to breed soft men." They are convinced, and with that they decide to stay in the rough land of Persia (9.122).

Of course, in the long term, this is not how the story turns out. The Persians do not stay in Persia, but rather they spread themselves over much of Asia, living amongst the population, adopting their customs and enjoying their luxuries. With the Cyrus anecdote, Herodotus reminds us that the Persians were once a hardy, rugged people, led by a king of the same virtues. It is affecting in its conveyance of a sense of the "good old days," for this was a time when the Persians were upwardly mobile, with much still to conquer and their *nomoi* intact. Cyrus' appearance at the end of Book Nine reminds us how much the Persians have changed since his account began in Book One.

For, as we have seen, the Persians are a changing people with changing customs and values. The earlier Persians, who thought it their highest virtue to never lie and who revere the natural elements are not the same as those who venture to Greece in 480 BC. Herodotus sets the Persians on a trajectory throughout the *Histories*, tracking these changes. It is this trajectory that

sets the Persians apart from the other foreign cultures Herodotus discusses at length, the Egyptians and the Scythians. In his ethnographies and histories of those two peoples, they are both static in their characters. Their avoidance of foreign ways aids this static nature. The Persians are eager to absorb new customs (1.135), and the continual absorption of foreign *nomoi* by conquering new lands results in their changing identity from one of rough-hewn hardness to one accustomed to luxuries and plenty. The Egyptians and Scythians, however, do not adopt anything outside their nation, and this is shown to have both its benefits and its detriments. When the Scythians initially conquer Asia they keep a measured distance from their subjects, taxing them and sometimes pillaging temples (1.105-106). This distancing attitude from others costs them an extended empire, but is also implied to be a root of the uncorrupted virtue and justice of the northern Scythians. As for the Egyptians, their unchanging character is a symptom of their inertia towards nontraditional ideas, including the military tactics that might have prevented their defeat at the hands of Cambyses.

The Egyptians and the Scythians are two cultures isolated in their beliefs and laws, and are also frozen in their identity; that is, the former is an example of an archetypically soft people, the latter, a hard one. What defines a soft and a hard culture? James Redfield puts it succinctly: “Soft peoples are characterized by luxury, the division of labor, and complexity of *nomoi*, especially in the sphere of religion; hard peoples are simple, harsh and fierce.”<sup>38</sup> These personalities are catalyzed upon their respective encounters with the Persians. Egypt may have a proud and long history, but the Egyptians’ very longevity makes them soft and inflexible, and when the Persians invade, they do not have the creativity to muster an energetic defense. From the time the Egyptians meet the Persians in battle to their retreat to the capital (which has not

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<sup>38</sup> Redfield, J., “Herodotus the Tourist” 109.

been prepared for a long siege as Babylon was in Book One), they make no attempts at adjusting their traditional tactics to meet the Persian threat.

Herodotus counters the sluggishness of the Egyptians with the alacrity of the Scythians. Faced with submission, they spring into action, mobilizing the people in flight and destroying their crops as they go, thwarting Darius' invasion successfully. The contrast between the two provides the template of the dynamic between hard and soft peoples. This template allows us to trace the progression of the Persians from a Scythian-like society to one that surpasses even the Egyptians in softness in a remarkably short amount of time. In his Persian ethnography in Book One, Herodotus observes that Persian males are "educated from the time they are five years old until they twenty, but they study only three things: horsemanship, archery, and honesty"; valor in battle proves one's manliness above all else (1.136). We see these elements of warrior culture in the undoubtedly tough Scythians, who drink the blood of their first human kill and fasten the scalps of their enemies to their horse-bridles (4.64). We can discern no such elements in Herodotus' ethnography of the Egyptians, who use foreign mercenaries at times (2.152; 2.163) and designate a special caste for warriors, as opposed to instilling martial values in all members of society (2.164).

As we move through the *Histories*, any sense of the Persians as a hard people falls away. In addition to the overt ways the Persians move towards a changing identity that we have seen (e.g. Darius' establishment of lying as a political necessity), the Persians' campaigns against the Egyptians and Scythians help establish the hard-soft dynamic. The process of Persian softening begins with Cyrus' invasion of the first soft people we encounter: the Lydians. It is established in Book One that soft peoples like the Lydians, who are known for their many luxuries (1.30; 1.71; 5.49), are susceptible to incursion by hard peoples; the converse is demonstrated in Cyrus' failed

invasion of the Massagetae. Cyrus' campaign against Tomyris is unsuccessful because, among other reasons, the Persians have become softened through their taste of Ionian culture and are thus unable to overcome the comparably harder Massagetae. Although he aptly keeps some initial rebellions in check, Darius is unable to conquer his intended targets the Scythians and the Greeks, who as hard peoples, both use unconventional tactics when confronted. The Scythians use Fabian tactics to wear down the Persians, and the Greeks deploy their most famous hoplite charge at Marathon (6.112), thus demonstrating the impossibility of a soft people vanquishing a hard foe, at least as far as Herodotus tells us.<sup>39</sup>

In establishing this dynamic, Herodotus sets up a broad reading of the history of the Persians' wars: an ongoing struggle between the hard and the soft; the civilized and the uncivilized. To grow as an empire is to inevitably assimilate and in doing so, one is bound to fall into the trap of new luxuries and soft living. The mainland Greeks have a reminder of this danger not far away in the form of the Ionians, and the memory of the long-gone Lydian Empire. The Lydians succumbed to soft living and were overrun by the Persians as a result. Supposedly the descendants of Heracles, the epitome of masculinity, they tumble into court intrigue under Candaules, whose excessive pride in his wife's beauty becomes his ruin. He is so proud that he forces his favorite bodyguard, Gyges, to play the voyeur as she takes off her clothes in the bedroom, an immoral request given that "among the Lydians and most of the foreign peoples it is felt as a great shame that even a man be seen naked." After consenting, Gyges is seen by the shamed woman, who offers him an ultimatum: he must be killed for seeing the queen naked and disgracing her, or kill the immoral king and become her husband. He carries out the task and becomes king of Lydia, founding his dynasty on treachery and sexual intrigue.

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<sup>39</sup> Redfield, J., "Herodotus the Tourist" 111-112.

Like the later Persians, the Lydians betray their values; Gyges acknowledges his transgression, saying, “Men have long ago made wise rules from which one ought to learn; one of these is that one should mind one’s own business” (1.07-13). Many years later, the Lydians are definitively neutered as a power as a result of Croesus’ actions. Threatening to demolish the city of Sardis in the aftermath of a failed rebellion, Cyrus is convinced by Croesus that by forbidding the Lydians to own weapons and inducing them to raise their sons “to take up the cithara and harp” and “to raise their sons to be retailers”, that they will become too womanly to take up arms against him again (1.155-6). Sidelined and “evicted from history”,<sup>40</sup> to borrow Redfield’s phrasing, the Lydians by the time of Persian ascendancy are a phantom of their once proud empire, one that haunts the Persians throughout the *Histories*.

The price for success is the corruption of one’s cultural character, and the Persians are particularly predisposed to this kind of corruption; their affinity for foreign customs better than their own, joined with the apparent drive of each Persian king to top or match the previous king’s territorial expansion, makes their identity transformation both rapid and destructive. A society that began its life in the *Histories* similar to the hardy Scythians has evolved by the end into a decaying empire run by inept products of nepotism and a king more interested in court romances than the execution of a war that he himself began. Their *erga megala* are not enduring pyramids, but monstrous and ephemeral bridges: symbols of their affront against the gods and their unrestrained militarism.

Aside from conveying a chronicle of an empire and a dynasty’s decline (a Greek *Buddenbrooks?*), what lesson might the Persians teach both the 5<sup>th</sup> century Greek and the 21<sup>st</sup> century scholar? Perhaps one answer (among many) lies in Herodotus’ last passages. As we have

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<sup>40</sup> Redfield, J., “Herodotus the Tourist” 111

seen, towards the end of Book Nine, Herodotus introduces the truly appalling Persian governor Artayctes, who, aside from extorting land and treasure from his superior Xerxes, takes women into Greek temples on Greek land to have sex with them. He meets the appropriate end for such a character when the Athenians push back against the Persians, laying siege against his domain in the Hellespont. When the situation inside the town grows desperate, he and other Persians flee, but they are eventually taken prisoner by the Athenians under Xanthippus. After unsuccessfully trying to manipulate a portent in his favor, Artayctes is crucified where Xerxes' bridge across the Bosphorus once ended, and he is made to watch as his son is stoned to death (9.116-121).

The Athenians' brutal execution of Artayctes at the closing of the *Histories* provokes the idea we have been examining so far with respect to the Persians; now we might ask, are the Greeks changing also? We have seen the Persian excesses in violence, going against their *nomos* of abstaining from summary executions, but with respect to the Greeks, Xanthippus' choice to crucify Artayctes seems pointedly cruel, given his unconvincing rationale of vengeance for the original owner of the plot stolen by the Persian governor. Artayctes' fate evokes Cambyses' taunting of Psammetichus at Memphis, where he parades the Egyptian king's son, being led to his execution, in front of the city walls (3.14). With this story, Herodotus seems to be warning his fellow Greeks, in his tacit way, that they too might fall into the trap of degraded laws and customs.

As the pattern we have examined tells us, those who conquer soft peoples are themselves consumed by the riches they obtain in doing so. While the Greeks stop short of conquering the Persians, they do push them back from their island possessions in the Aegean with considerable success, and they achieve hegemony over the eastern Mediterranean. In the close contact they have had (and continue to have) whilst warring with the Persians, they have become entangled in



their affairs, as the ventures of both the Spartan and Athenian leadership after the war show. Spartans of all levels of society mixed with Eastern Greeks while campaigning abroad; far from their hardened traditions of home, “they were exposed to the temptations of wealth and luxury.”<sup>41</sup> The results of such interaction are the most evident in Pausanias, who intrigues with the Persian court and meets his death as a fugitive in Sparta.<sup>42</sup> Themistocles too flees to the safety of the Persian court when he is implicated in the same scandal.<sup>43</sup>

The *Histories* ends before these events are told, but Herodotus’ audience were likely aware of them.<sup>44</sup> Given the trend intimated by Herodotus with the tale of Artayctes and reinforced by the exploits of the Greek leadership after the war, are we to believe that the Greeks are on the path to softness? If this path begins with the transforming of one’s values, we must look to those for the answer. Redfield makes the distinction between the way the Greeks and the Persians “use” their *nomoi*. For the Persians in the *Histories*, authority is proven through defiance and evasion of their *nomoi*, as Cambyses shows when he marries his sister, an illegality that is trumped by the law that says that the Persian king may do whatever he likes (3.31). Darius sets himself above the laws of the Persians by championing the lie as a tool of empire in the Magus affair (3.72). By contrast, the Greeks uphold their *nomoi* with pride; their venerated figures are the law-givers like Solon of Athens and Lycurgus of Sparta, who “brought the Lacedaemonians to *eunomie*, stable lawfulness.”<sup>45</sup>

It is also the way the Greeks and Persians import their *nomoi* that is crucial to their divergence. As we have discussed, the Persians adopt new ways on the basis that they are more

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<sup>41</sup> Hammond, N.G.L., *A History of Greece to 322 B.C.* 261.

<sup>42</sup> See same above

<sup>43</sup> Hammond, N.G.L., *A History of Greece to 322 B.C.* 265.

<sup>44</sup> Redfield, J., “Herodotus the Tourist” 115.

<sup>45</sup> Redfield, J., “Herodotus the Tourist” 117.

pleasing or beautiful than their own; they incorporate such customs as Median dress and Egyptian armor, and pederasty from the Greeks (1.135). Armed with their particular “love of learning” particular to them (1.60), the Greeks decide which customs to adopt on an intellectual basis. Herodotus’ recommendations and commendations are founded on their functional merits, such as the supposedly more efficient Egyptian calendar (2.04). Solon imports a law to Athens from the Egyptians because “it is a perfect law” (2.177).

With this evidence in hand, it would seem that the Greeks are better protected than most from corruption from outside sources. Yet Herodotus does not allow us securely to believe in the safety of the Greeks, and given the events taking place in the mid-fifth century, one cannot be surprised. The Athenian Empire’s meteoric rise to power, and its subsequent measures to keep it (e.g. the suppression of revolts in Naxos and Thasos) must have been unnerving for Herodotus and anyone aware of Persian history. On top of the Athenian acropolis sat the Parthenon, a temple to Athena but also a testament to Pericles’ extortion of the Delian League and Athenian greed. Despite their intellectual customs, there were no sure signs that the Greeks would not be corrupted beyond repair by their emergence as a top military power.

If the *Histories* had extended to record the Peloponnesian War, it would have indeed showed that the Athenian and Spartan rivalry would bring about so much destruction that the Greek cities would never regain their strength, leaving them prey to the machinations of the Persians and the armies of the Macedonians. Of course, the *Histories* is a meditation on the fortunes of nations, and like the happiness of men, the fortune of nations does not stay in the same place forever. We see it visited upon many peoples throughout the *Histories*: we are reminded of the glories of Egypt, now long past; the Scythians who in their isolation resist change and in doing so remain static; the Persians and Lydians, who gain power and then lose it,

and, finally, the Greeks who overcome adversity and become great, but risk their downfall in doing so.

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