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WHO ARE HERODOTUS' PERSIANS?

ABSTRACT: *In analyzing how Herodotus' descriptions of foreign societies reflect Greek assumptions and prejudices, we have sometimes failed to recognize the extent to which he reports persuasive and historically valid information. This is particularly true of the Persians for whom Herodotus appears to have had access to very good sources, especially perhaps among Medes and Persians living in Asia Minor. This paper argues that Herodotus' representation of Persian character and customs and his understanding of the relationship between the king and his subjects is based on genuine native traditions that reflect an internal debate within Persian elites in the aftermath of their war against Greece.*

Historians of ancient Persia often deplore their dependence on Greek authors, whose reliability is necessarily undermined by their special perspective and foreignness.¹ It is true that even the most important and fair-minded Greek source on Persia, Herodotus, speaks to the Greeks about themselves through his description of exotic worlds. He also, however, genuinely attempts to understand foreign cultures on their own terms and, in the case of Persia, he is in an exceptionally privileged position to do so.²

I. King and People

Herodotus is fascinated by the Persians and confident in his access to informants who can clarify for him who the Persians are as a culture and where they came from ideologically. His biography of Cyrus, the founder of the Persian Empire, puts a special emphasis on who Cyrus was, his γένεσις, and on the opinion of himself (τὸ δοκέειν) which that engendered.³ His portrayals of Cyrus' successors, Cambyses, Darius, and Xerxes, are also individualized to an extent unparalleled in other sources.⁴ Although Herodotus, needless to say, does not get everything right, he provides a great deal of authentic

¹ See recently M. Brosius, *The Persians: An Introduction* (London 2006) 2–3, 76–78. See A. Kuhrt, *The Ancient Near East c. 3000–330 B.C.E.*, Vol. II (London 1995) 647–48.

² See P. Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander: A History of the Persian Empire*, tr. P. T. Daniels (Winona Lake, Ind., 2002) 7 and passim. For a recent accounts by classicists, see M. Flower, “Herodotus and the Persians,” in C. Dewald and J. Marincola, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Herodotus* (Cambridge 2006) 274–89; A. M. Bowie, *Herodotus: Histories Book VIII* (Cambridge 2007) 1–12. For the validity of an externally oriented approach that shows what Herodotus learned from his foreign sources and not simply how he created “mirrors” for Greek identity, see I. S. Moyer, “Herodotus and an Egyptian Mirage: The Genealogies of the Theban Priests,” *JHS* 122 (2002) 70–90.

³ See 1.204.2 with 1.95.1 and 1.130.2.

⁴ Some scholars have criticized these portrayals as fictional and Hellenocentric. See especially H. Sancisi-Weersenburg, “The Personality of Xerxes, King of Kings,” in E. J. Bakker, I. J. F. de Jong, and H. de Wees, eds., *Brill's Companion to Herodotus* (Leiden 2002) 579–90, reprinted from L. de Meyer and E. Haerink, eds., *Archaeologia Iranica et Orientalia Miscellanea in Honorem Louis Vanden Berghe* vol. I (Gent 1989) 346–64. As I will argue, however, Herodotus' representation of Persian kings seems to be based on oral Iranian sources and reveals a Persian, and not solely a Greek, bias.

information. Even some of his inaccuracies are illuminating, as they are rooted in Persian traditions or discourse.

Unique to Herodotus is also the extent to which he focuses on the Persians in general, their national character and their opinions. In the *Histories*, Persian kingship and the collectivity of the Persians, though interrelated, also possess a mutual autonomy such as we do not find in the available Achaemenid evidence of royal inscriptions and art. The king and his court officials are prominent actors in Herodotus' historical narrative, while the Persians as an *ethnos* dominate the ethnography. The king and his courtiers are for the most part the doers of deeds and speakers of speeches in the past. The ethnic Persians also exist in the present as an apparently more direct object of the *histor*'s experience: they overlap with what we would broadly (very broadly) call his sources.

The historical embodiment of this dual vision of Persian society (kingship and *ethnos*) is precisely the founder Cyrus. According to the tradition Herodotus chooses to follow—and he acknowledges there were others (1.95.1)—Cyrus' mother was the daughter of the king of Media, while his father, Cambyses, was simply a Persian from a good family (οικίης . . . ἀγαθῆς, 1.107.2). Now, this is one of Herodotus' proven historical inaccuracies, since we know from the Babylonian and Persian documents that Cambyses, the father of Cyrus, was actually king of Anshan, a kingdom in Parsa (modern Fars, in southwestern Iran) that had survived the disintegration of Elam and had become subordinated first to the Assyrians and then perhaps to the Medes.⁵ The first king of Anshan was Cyrus' great-grandfather, Teispes, followed by an earlier Cyrus, and then by Cambyses, the father of our Cyrus.⁶ Herodotus knows this genealogy of Cyrus;⁷ he also knows (3.75.1) that the first known ancestor, the father of Teispes, was Achaemenes, although this is probably an unhistorical tradition started by Cyrus' third successor, Darius, for

⁵ For the timing of a possible Median conquest of the Persians, which Herodotus (1.102.1) attributes to the reign of Phraortes (647–625 B.C.E.), see M. Diakonoff, "Media," in I. Gershevitch, ed., *The Cambridge History of Iran, vol. II: The Median and Achaemenid Periods* (Cambridge 1985) 132.

⁶ Our earlier evidence of a Persian king is the neo-Elamite inscription on a seal that identifies Cyrus I (the grandfather of Cyrus the Great) as "Cyrus of Anshan, son of Teispes"; PFS 93, English trans. #1 in M. Brosius, *The Persian Empire from Cyrus II to Artaxerxes I* (London 2000) 4. Accadian cuneiform documents that call Cyrus or his predecessors "king of Anshan" include the Cyrus Cylinder 21 (in W. Eilers, "Le texte cuneiforme cunéiforme du Cylindre de Cyrus," *Acta Iranica* II (1974) 33; #12 in Brosius, *The Persian Empire*, 11), and the Nabonidus Chronicle column ii, line 1; see #7 in A. K. Grayson, *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles* (New York 1975); #11 in Brosius, *The Persian Empire*, 8–9. All these and the other primary sources I cite are now collected in the monumental work by A. Kuhrt, ed., *The Persian Empire: A Corpus of Sources from the Achaemenid Period*, 2 vols (London 2007).

⁷ Herodotus mentions that the grandfather of Cyrus was also named Cyrus (1.111.3); that Persian kings came from the "phratry" of the Achaemenids of the tribe of the Pasargadae (1.125.3); that the founder of Cyrus' family was Achaemenes (3.75.1); and that Xerxes traced his descent from Achaemenes, Teispes and Cambyses I (7.11), though this last passage is confused and in contradiction with the more correct information at 1.209.2.

the purpose of linking his family to that of Cyrus and legitimizing his claim to the throne.⁸ But although Herodotus correctly records the Achaemenid family line, he talks about it not as a royal dynasty but, more broadly, as a noble clan.⁹ Unlike, for example, Xenophon (for whom Cyrus' father is "king of Persia"), Herodotus never says that Cyrus' father or any of his Persian ancestors was a king, or that Cyrus himself was king before succeeding Astyages.¹⁰ As a *Persian*, therefore, Herodotus' Cyrus is the representative of a Persian elite not necessarily identified with kingship. Conversely, to the extent that he is of royal blood and a ruler, Cyrus is for Herodotus a Mede. He is, in the words of the Delphic oracle, the mule who will become "king of the Medes" (1.55).

II. Median Royalty

For Herodotus the Achaemenid royal tradition is therefore a Median inheritance. As soon as he formulates the question "who was Cyrus?" (1.95.1), he immediately goes back in order to account for the institutional origins and development of the kingship as a Median phenomenon. According to his narrative, a man named Deioeces was first appointed king by the Medes at a time of widespread lawlessness and created *ex nihilo* the basic structures of a centralized kingship: a privileged royal space (the capital fortress of Ecbatana), court protocol, and law-enforcement procedures (1.98.1–101), features that will largely become the trappings of Persian royalty later on.¹¹ As a child, Cyrus plays at being king according to the institutions of

⁸ See Darius' genealogy in the Behistun Inscription: DB I 1–6, #10 in R. G. Kent, *Old Persian: Grammar, Texts, Lexicon*, American Oriental Society (New Haven 1950); the newest edition is by R. Schmitt, *The Bisitun Inscription of Darius the Great. Old Persian Text. Corpus Inscriptionum Iranicarum I 1* (London 1991). A new English translation appears in Brosius (above, n.6) 25–40. The Pasargadae inscriptions that describe Cyrus as king and an Achaemenid (CMA, b, c; Kent, 116) are from Darius' times.

⁹ 1.125.3 (above, n.7). Herodotus calls "Achaemenids" a nameless group surrounding Cambyses (3.65.3) as well as a number of individual Persian notables: Hystaspes, the son of Arsames and father of Darius (1.109.2); Pharnaspes (3.2.2); Sataspes (4.43.1); Megabates (5.32); Tigranes (7.62.1); and Artachaees (7.117.2). Briant (above, n.2) 92, 110–11.

¹⁰ According to Herodotus 1.214.2, however, Cyrus reigned for twenty-nine years; since we know from Babylonian documents that Cyrus was king until 530 B.C.E. and that he defeated Astyages in 550, Herodotus' figure only makes sense if we attribute part of it (nine years) to the period when Cyrus was king in Anshan. In Xenophon (*Cyropaedia* 1.2.1), Cyrus is royal on both sides since his mother is the daughter of the king of the Medes, as in Herodotus. Ctesias goes entirely in the opposite direction, making Cyrus the lowborn son of a bandit and a shepherdess from the most marginal Persian tribe, the Mardi; see F8d* 3 Lenfant, from Nicolas of Damascus (*Exc. de Insidiis* p. 23, 23 de Boor = *FGrHist* 90 F66); D. Lenfant, ed., *Ctésias de Cnide* (Paris 2004).

¹¹ Numerous elements in Herodotus' Median narrative reappear later in the *Histories* or in other Greek sources as part of a Persian context. Proper names of Medes return as names of Persians (Artembares, 1.114.3). The king of Media is called "King," without the article (1.99.1), as later the Persian king will be. Eunuchs are in charge of various functions (1.113.3, 117.5), as they will be at the Persian court; the king has the control of roads (1.123.3) and public officials are called the King's Eye (1.114.2; see 1.100.2, 112.2; Aesch. *Persians* 980; Aristoph. *Acharnians* 92; Xen. *Cyr.* 8.2.10–11; Plut. *Art.* 98).

Median monarchy (1.114). As an adult king, he gains the allegiance of the Medes.¹² His eventual “*opinion* that he was in a certain sense beyond the human” (τὸ δοκέειν πλέον τι εἶναι ἀνθρώπου) internalizes the Median Deioces’ preoccupation with “*seeming* to be of a different nature” (ἕτεροῖός σφι δοκεῖ εἶναι, 1.99.2).

Also imperialism, according to Herodotus, is a royal Median practice and not initially a Persian one. Cyrus’ father, Cambyses, is not only of non-royal blood, but also, as Astyages is careful to verify, a man “of peaceful disposition” (τρόπου . . . ἡσυχίου, 1.107.2). As a public term, ἡσυχίη 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. It is by emulating his Median predecessors that Cyrus lays the foundations of the Achaemenid policy of continuous expansion.¹³ Moreover, Cyrus’ generals, Harpagus and Mazares, are Medes (1.156–177).¹⁴ Before his last campaign, the queen of the Massagetae complains that Cyrus will never “stay at peace” (δὲ ἡσυχίης εἶναι), and she does so in a speech where she addresses him as “King of the Medes” (1.205.1–2). The perception that Persian foreign policy continues Median foreign policy is reflected in the fact that Herodotus and other Greeks, when they speak of the Persians as a conquering power, often call them “Medes.”¹⁵

Like Herodotus, modern historians, too, would like to know the political antecedents of Cyrus and the history of pre-imperial Persia.¹⁶ But Herodotus’ theory that Persian kingship derives from Median kingship is historically problematic because the very existence of a large centralized Median state such as Herodotus describes is not corroborated either by archaeology or by the documentary texts.¹⁷

¹² 1.123.1, 124.2, 127.3. The *Nabonidus Chronicle* in an entry for the year 550 B.C.E., confirms the last passage, recording that the Median army rebelled against Astyages; see 106, #7.ii.1–2 in Grayson (above, n.6).

¹³ Just as Phraortes “went from one people to the other” (1.102.1), so “no people [Cyrus] marched against could escape him” (1.204.2); see also the conquests of Cyaxares (1.103.2). For the Achaemenid policy of universal rule, see 7.8a.1 and γ1, confirmed by inscriptions; see Flower (above, n.2), 377, citing Brosius (above, n.1) 47, where Darius calls himself “king of the earth far and wide.”

¹⁴ As was also Datis, Darius’ general in the Marathon campaign (6.94–101, 118–119).

¹⁵ See especially the ambiguity at 1.163.3 and 185.1. For the Greek habit of calling the Persians “Medes” in certain contexts, see D. F. Graf, “Medism: The Origin and Significance of the Term,” *JHS* 104 (1984) 20–24, with criticism by C. Tuplin, “The Persians as Medes,” in H. Sancisi-Weerdenburg, A. Kuhrt, and M. C. Root, *Continuity and Change*, Proceedings of the Last Achaemenid History Workshop, April 6–8, 1990, Ann Arbor, Michigan. *Achaemenid History* 8 (Leiden 1994) 236–38.

¹⁶ The question is explored by P. Briant, “La Perse avant l’empire (un état de la question),” *Iranica Antiqua* 19 (1984) 71–118, and, more concisely and with a considerable shift in position, by Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander* (above, n.2) 13–28.

¹⁷ For the evidence, or lack thereof, see especially P. R. Helm, “Herodotus’ *Mêdikos Logos* and Median History,” *Iran* 19 (1981) 86; H. Sancisi Weerdenburg, “Was there ever a Median Empire?” in A. Kuhrt and H. Sancisi-Weerdenburg, *Method and Theory*, Proceedings of the London 1985 Achaemenid History Workshop. *Achaemenid History* 3 (Istanbul 1988) 205; M. Liverani, “The Rise and Fall of Media,” in G. B. Lanfranchi, M. Roaf, and R. Rollinger, eds., *Continuity of Empire (?): Assyria, Media, Persia*. History of the Ancient Near East Monographs 5 (Padova 2003) 3.

At least until almost the end of the seventh century, that is to say, until the time of Herodotus' Cyaxares, cuneiform tablets recording Assyrian campaigns in the Zagros clearly represent the Medes as fragmented in different groups led by local chieftains.¹⁸ It is hard to see how they could have provided a royal or imperial model for the Persians. In current scholarly opinion, the reverse seems to be more likely: Herodotus' view of the Median kingship appears to be based on what the Greeks knew about the Persian Empire in their own times.¹⁹

This does not mean, however, that Herodotus' Median account is entirely unauthentic. The problem of sources is here somewhat similar to the problem of the sources of the Constitutional Debate in Book 3 (80–84), with which the beginning of Herodotus' *Médikos logos* has much in common. Both the Constitutional Debate and the story of the founding of the Median monarchy by Deioces are about choosing, at the time of a power void, the best possible form of government to ensure law and order in a state.²⁰ In both narratives we should make allowance for a considerable Greek element, especially of fifth-century Sophistic stamp, but both passages also incorporate Iranian information. In the Constitutional Debate, the Iranian component is Persian, as we shall see later;²¹ for the *Médikos logos*, it may be partially Median.

This Median strand emerges from certain striking, if sometimes skewed, correspondences between Herodotus' narrative on the one hand and Assyrian and Persian documents on the other. Herodotus' last two Median kings, Cyaxares and Astyages, appear in the Babylonian chronicle as leaders of a Median coalition, or even perhaps a Median state.²² As far as the first two kings are concerned, Deioces and Phraortes, their *names* (at a minimum) seem to be genuine Median names.²³ This

¹⁸ See Liverani (above, n.17) 4; K. Radner, "An Assyrian View of the Medes," in Lanfranchi, Roaf, and Rollinger (above, n. 17) 37–64. For later (Persian) documentary evidence on the Medes, see below n.22 and n.23.

¹⁹ See Strabo 11.13.9. Briant (above, n.2) 26. By contrast, A. Panaino ("Herodotus I, 96–101: Deioces' Conquest of Power and the Foundation of Sacred Royalty," in Lanfranchi, Roaf, and Rollinger [above, n.17] 327–38) argues for Iranian institutions common to Medes and Persians.

²⁰ See C. Dewald, "Form and Content: The question of Tyranny in Herodotus," in C. Morgan, ed., *Popular Tyranny* (Austin 2003) 28–29.

²¹ See below. Herodotus' assurance, not once but twice (3.80.1; 6.43.3), that after the death of Cambyses, the noble Persians actually engaged in deliberations about their political future encourages us to accept that Herodotus was partially drawing on a Persian tradition; *contra* D. Fehling, *Herodotus and his "Sources": Citation, Invention and Narrative Art*, tr. by J. G. Howie (Leeds 1989) 194.

²² For Cyaxares (*Umakishtar*), see the Babylonian *Fall of Niniveh Chronicle*, #3.24–30, 38–47 in Grayson (above, n.6) 93–94, which records his capture of Niniveh and somewhat corresponds to Hdt. 1.103.1–3 and 106.2. Astyages (*Ishtumegu*) appears as in the *Nabonidus Chronicle* as the adversary of Cyrus of Persia (see Hdt. 1.127); see #7.ii.1–4 in Grayson (above, n.6).

²³ A *Daiakku* appears as a governor of Mannaea in the annals of Sargon II (724–25 B.C.E.); see D. D. Luckenbill, *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia II* (Chicago 1927) 27; A. G. Lie, A. *The Inscriptions of Sargon II King of Assyria. The Annals* (Paris 1929) 16. The identification of this *Daiakku* with Herodotus' Deioces is no longer generally accepted; see Helm (above, n.17) 86; Diakonoff (above, n.5)

evidence indicates that the prominent role of Medes in Herodotus' story of Cyrus is not merely a Greek construct (see 1.55), but is also based on Median traditions. Sources who had particular interest in transmitting these traditions about the importance of the Median component in the Persian imperial monarchy may have included, according to some scholars, the descendants of Harpagus living in Lycia.²⁴ This is an attractive possibility, because other aspects of Herodotus' representation of the Persians also point principally, though not exclusively, to Asia Minor as a clearing-house of information. Both Median and Persian sources, independently motivated, appear to have cooperated in shaping Herodotus' view of Cyrus as a noble Persian who became king when he succeeded the Median king Astyages.

III. Persian (High) Society

If Median sources insisted on the derivation of Persian kingship from Median kingship, on the other hand the sources that de-emphasized Cyrus' royal heritage on his father's side seem to have been Persian: noble Persians, who admired Cyrus but also viewed him not as a superior being, but as one of their own, and who perhaps even held a different conception of royalty than what had become orthodox in their own times.²⁵ After Cyrus, the Persian kingship as Herodotus represents it crystallizes and expands the Median model, but without acknowledging it as such.²⁶ This agrees with the evidence of Persian inscriptions, where the Achaemenids underline their Persian ethnicity and never call themselves kings of Media or of the Medes.²⁷

83, 90–91. The Assyrian documents, however, testify to *Daiakku* in compound Median names (*Mashdaiakku*, *Mashdakku*) that were not uncommon among Medes; see S. C. Brown, "The *Mēdikos Logos* of Herodotus and the Evolution of the Median State," in A. Kuhrt and H. Sancisi-Weederburg (above, n.17) 76. Phraortes appears as *Fra-vartish* in Darius' Behistun Inscription, as a later Median rebel who claimed to be the descendant of Cyaxares: DB 2.13–7 and 2.64–78, 92–93, ##24, 31–32, 35 in Kent (above, n.8). See Diakonoff (above, n.5) 104–7, 113; Brown, 76–78; D. Asheri in O. Murray and A. Moreno, eds., *A Commentary on Herodotus Books I–IV*, by D. Asheri, A. Lloyd, and A. Corcella (Oxford 2007) 151–52.

²⁴ R. Drews, *The Greek Accounts of Eastern History* (Cambridge, Mass., 1973) 82; J. M. Cook, "The Rise of the Achaemenids and Establishment of their Empire," in Gershevitch (above, n. 5), 202; Asheri (above, n. 23), 68 and 197. This suggestion is mainly based on Herodotus 1.176, which reports that when Harpagus captured Xanthus in Lycia, the inhabitants who were present in the city all died in battle, so that in his time most of the Lycians were newcomers. The recurrence in inscriptions of the name Harpagus (Lycian *Arpakkuh*) suggests that either Harpagus himself or someone from his family settled there and founded a Harpagid dynasty. But for different views see Helm (above, n.17); Sancisi-Weederburg (above, n.17), 21–12, and "The Orality of Herodotus' *Medikos Logos*," in Sancisi-Weederburg, Kuhrt, and Root (above, n.15). For Herodotus' use of oral traditions in general, see especially O. Murray, "Herodotus and Oral History," in H. Sancisi-Weerdenburg and A. Kuhrt (eds.), *The Greek Sources. Achaemenid History 2* (Leiden 1987) 93–115.

²⁵ See, e.g., the sources that do not want to report excessively celebratory legends about Cyrus' upbringing at 1.95.1 (see also 1.122.3).

²⁶ Of the Median kings only Astyages is mentioned outside of Book 1, and only as the Persians' first opponent (3.62; 7.8a), not as the predecessor of their kings.

²⁷ See above, n.7. *Contra* Graf (above, n.15) 17–29, who argues that the Achaemenids presented themselves as continuators of the Median kings.

Herodotus' account also subtly and insistently communicates the idea that the Persian monarchy after Cyrus diverged from the values that Herodotus himself represents as genuinely Persian. This is quite possibly not so much the result of Herodotus' Hellenocentric mind-set as the sign of a current Persian polemic that was still alive at the time when Herodotus was writing about these things. At one point we learn that "the Persians say" (in the present tense) that whereas Cyrus was a father to them, his first successor Cambyses was a despot (for his abuses of power) and his second successor, Darius, was a "shopkeeper" (κάπηλος), a contemptuous term referring to Darius' fastidious exacting of tributes and his running of the empire like a shop (3.89.3). Leslie Kurke has brilliantly analyzed this statement in relation to Greek aristocratic ideology.²⁸ But what about *Persian* ideology? Who are the Persians who say this about their later kings? If we look closely, we might come up with an interesting window into a Persian political world contemporary to Herodotus himself.

Herodotus' Persian narrative after Cyrus, especially in the sections that cover the end of Cambyses' reign and the beginning of that of Darius, features a number of aristocrats who ultimately remain loyal to the monarchy as their ancestral custom (3.82.5), but who are disenchanted with what it has become. The first of these is Prexaspes, who disavows his earlier complicity in Cambyses' wrongdoings and hurls himself from a tower; before doing so he proclaims his moral obligation to tell the truth and praises Cyrus one last time (3.75). The existence of this man is not corroborated by other sources,²⁹ but in the crisis that follows the seven very historical Persian nobles who organized the conspiracy against the Magus considered, according to Herodotus, the possibility of eliminating monarchical rule (in the Constitutional Debate; see above). Two of them, Otanes and Megabyzus, argued respectively that democracy or oligarchy would be more beneficial for the Persians. Both came around in the end, but Otanes earned a special dispensation so that "to this day the house of Otanes is the only house in Persia which remains free, subject to the king only as much as they want, without violating the *nomoi* of the Persians" (3.83.3).³⁰ With Darius, the kingship is re-founded: his killing of the Median Magoi reenacts Cyrus' defeat of the Mede Astyages. Like Cyrus in Herodotus, Darius is an aristocrat, not the son of a king, and the seven noble conspirators put new egalitarian rules in place (3.84.2). These do not last long, however: when one of the group, Intaphrenes, challenges the Deioces-like isolation of the new king in his palace, he and his male relatives end up executed (3.118–19).

²⁸ L. Kurke, *Coins, Bodies, Games and Gold: The Politics of Meaning in Archaic Greece* (Princeton 1999) 68–89.

²⁹ J. M. Balcer, *A Prosopographical Study of the Ancient Persians Royal and Noble c. 550–450 B.C.* (Lewiston, N.Y., 1993) 93.

³⁰ For later developments of the tradition of Otanes and his family, see Briant (above, n.2) 133–35. On the Constitutional Debate and surrounding narrative, see most recently C. Pelling, "Herodotus' Debate on the Constitutions," *PCPhS* 48 (2002) 123–58.

In the world of the narrative, then, several Persians communicate discontent with their kings after Cyrus.³¹ In the world of Herodotus' research, their descendants may have done the same—it is men like these who call Cyrus “father,” Cambyses “despot,” and Darius “shopkeeper.” Herodotus himself mentions a Zopyrus, who lived in his times and was the great-grandson of Megabyzus, the speaker in favor of oligarchy in the Constitutional Debate. This Zopyrus contemporary of Herodotus had a grandfather, also named Zopyrus, who achieved heroic feats on behalf of Darius (3.153–59). But both he and his father (Megabyzus the Younger) had considerable trouble with a subsequent king, Artaxerxes I.³² It is likely that Zopyrus the Younger was directly or indirectly Herodotus' source for the story of how Zopyrus the Elder recaptured Babylon.³³ It is, at any rate, ideologically significant that Herodotus' narrative of this event, while proleptically referring to the younger Zopyrus, also praises the elder Zopyrus as the greatest Persian benefactor (according to Darius), *aside from Cyrus* (3.160.1). Are these the terms in which Zopyrus jr. spoke to Herodotus about his grandfather?

But Herodotus, of course, would have had access to other oral sources among Persians living in Asia because of land grants, or among the staffs of the satrapies of his times. As D. M. Lewis has observed, there was no “political and linguistic iron curtain between Greeks and Persians in Asia.” It is therefore not necessary, as well as not realistic, “to look for very specific holes in this curtain through which Herodotus' information might have come.”³⁴ What we should rather ask is this: what *kind* of information was Herodotus able to collect? The answer is perhaps twofold. On the one hand, Persians of the ilk of Zopyrus, as we have seen, no doubt shared with Herodotus their versions of historical events; in these family traditions, their ancestors played a more prominent or heroic role, and the monarch

³¹ This group does not include rebels like Oroetes (3.120–27) and Aryandes (4.166–67).

³² Megabyzus the Younger was one of the generals in the campaign against Greece (7.82, 121.3) and he subsequently fought against the Athenians at the time of their expedition to Egypt, which ended in 454 (3.160). As satrap of Syria he rebelled against Artaxerxes and was eventually pardoned around 448 (Ctesias *FGrHist* 688 F 93.2). His son, Zopyrus the Younger, who had supported him in the revolt, fled to Athens after his father's death and tried to negotiate the surrender of Caunus to the Athenians, possibly in the 430s (Ctesias *FGrHist* 688 F 14 [40 and 45]). See R. Meiggs, *The Athenian Empire* (Oxford 1972) 436–37.

³³ The theory was first suggested by J. Wells, “The Persian Friends of Herodotus,” *JHS* 27 (1907) 37–47. In its most general formulation, it is still accepted as likely. See Drews (above, n.24) 83; P. Briant, “Source grecques et histoire achéménide,” in *Rois, tributs et paysans: Études sur les formations tributaires du Moyen-Orient ancien* (Paris 1982) 494; M. A. Dandamaev and V. G. Lukonin, *The Culture and Social Institutions of Ancient Iran*, English edition by P. L. Kohl with the assistance of D. J. Dadson (Cambridge 1989) 391; Flower (above, n.2) 279.

³⁴ D. M. Lewis, “Persians in Herodotus,” in M. H. Jameson, ed., *The Greek Historians: Literature and History Papers presented to A. E. Raubitschek* (Saratoga, Calif., 1985) 104. *Contra* P. Georges, *Barbarian Asia and the Greek Experience* (Baltimore 1994) 49–58, who thinks that Herodotus, like other fifth-century Greeks, had little opportunity for contact with Persians.

was portrayed more ambivalently, than in official royal documents.³⁵ But, on the other hand, these Persians could also be glimpsed behind “the Persians” in the *Histories* who explain themselves, their worldview and their *nomoi* in the present tense, contributing information on which royal documents have little to say.

It is an extraordinary portrayal: the Persians’ sense of propriety, their belief that they are the best culture (1.134.2), and their opinions on a variety of subjects are on display especially in Books 1 and 3. In Herodotus’ Persian ethnography (1.131–140), even practical *nomoi* tend to be described cognitively, in terms not of what the Persians normally do, but of what they think it is right to do (e.g., they do not simply celebrate birthdays with a big dinner, they “consider it proper” to do so; 1.133.1). This collectivity is the most vocal and opinionated in the work, with the possible exception of the Egyptians.

Unlike the Egyptians of Herodotus’ Book 2, his Persians have changed with their history. At the time of Croesus, the Lydians used to identify them by the list of the things they did *not* have: they wore nothing but leather, they got little to eat and drank no wine.³⁶ When “the Persians” speak in the present of narration, however, they do not mention this past, when they allegedly were the poor and tough primitive opponents of a wealthier culture. They *are* the wealthier culture, and still tough at the same time. They acknowledge no independent history before Cyrus’ conquest of Lydia, which they take as a given. They have an “ideology of prosperity”;³⁷ they consume plenty of good things, drink large quantities of wine (1.133.3) and, in fact, they criticize others (that is to say, the Greeks) for not having enough to eat. Their own lavish banquets (1.133.1–2) represent the perfect fulfillment of an early promise of Cyrus. Before leading them against Astyages, Cyrus gathered all the Persians in one place and made them clear brush for a whole day. The next day, he slaughtered his father’s cattle and treated them to a big feast. He then asked them to choose: yesterday or today, their present subjection or being free under his leadership. They chose freedom and feasting (1.126.1–6).

³⁵ These events would have included the conspiracy against the Magus, some version of the Constitutional Debate, and circumstances of Darius’ accession. Cook (above, n.24) 202. The similarities and discrepancies between parts of Herodotus’ Book 3 and Darius’ Behistun Inscription corroborate the hypothesis that Herodotus relied on genuine aristocratic Persian oral traditions that differ in interesting ways from the official tradition promulgated by the king. J. M. Balcer, *Herodotus and Bisitun*, *Historia Einzelschriften* 49 (Wiesbaden 1987); D. Asheri, “Erodoto e Bisitun,” in E. Gabba, ed., *Presentazione e scrittura della storia: storiografia* (Como 1999) 112; Briant (above, n.2) 107–37; M. Moggi, “Artabano in Erodoto,” in M. Giangiulio, ed., *Erodoto e “il modello erodoteo”: Formazione trasmissione delle tradizioni storiche in Grecia*, (Trento 2005) 203–205. See Jacoby *RE* 2 (1913) 431.

³⁶ 1.71.2–3 (voice of Sandanis). See 1.72.4 (voice of the narrator): they had nothing good or luxurious (ἀβρόν). 1.89.2 (voice of Croesus): they were violent and without possessions (ἀρχήματα).

³⁷ I am borrowing a phrase used by C. Herrenschmidt, “L’empire perse achéménide,” in M. Duverger, ed., *Le concept d’empire* (Paris 1980) 89, to describe the historical Persians.

In the Persian ethnography negative statements are a point of pride, indicating not what the Persians cannot have, but what they choose not to have or do. The Persians do not represent gods in human form and consider foolish those who do so [like the Greeks] (1.131.1); they sacrifice with no fires, no libations, no pipes, no fillets or barley (1.132.1), but never without a Magus at hand (1.132.3). They do not urinate, vomit, or spit into rivers or in public (1.138.2; 1.133.3)—and so on and so forth. In the same polemical tone, as we learn elsewhere, they do not—absolutely *not*—use marketplaces.³⁸ Cyrus is again their man, who once said “I have no respect for people (i.e., the Greeks) who have a designated place in the middle of the city where they gather to deceive each other” (1.153.1). This puts in even sharper relief their gibe about Darius “the shopkeeper” at 3.89.3.³⁹

Herodotus indicates that Persian society includes different social classes.⁴⁰ But the overwhelming impression is that those who appear to be the press agents of Persian identity form a rather homogeneous group. They are magnificent people with magnificent names (1.139), who value courage in battle and teach their sons only three things—archery, riding and telling the truth (1.136.1–2). They think that lying is the worst possible behavior and, next to that, being in debt, because it leads to lying (1.138). In this, they are like Cyrus (who despises the Greeks as liars, 1.153.1) or Prexaspes (who dies in the act of telling the truth, 3.75.2), but they resemble not at all later kings. In the Behistun and Naqsh-e Rostam inscriptions, which represent manifestoes of Persian royal ideology, Darius claims the Zoroastrian principle of sworn enmity to the Lie (*grauba*).⁴¹ But the tradition reported by Herodotus attributes precisely to him a convoluted speech that theorizes the political necessity of lying (3.72.4–5).⁴²

The Persians honor Cyrus because he has made them wealthy and dominant and the values that he represents are also their values.

³⁸ A very strong negation: αὐτοὶ γὰρ οἱ Πέρσαι ἀγορήσι οὐδὲν ἐώθασιν χρᾶσθαι, οὐδέ σφι ἐστὶ τὸ παράπαν ἀγορῆ (1.153.2). For a narratological discussion of Herodotus’ Persian ethnography, see R. V. Munson, *Telling Wonders: Ethnographic and Political Discourse in the Work of Herodotus* (Ann Arbor 2001) 149–56.

³⁹ Cyrus lets the sack of Sardis go on as a private free-for-all until Croesus suggests he apply some fiscal control (1.88.2–3). After the conquest of Lydia, he entrusts Lydian treasures to a local official, Pactyas (1.153.3–4). Historians attribute these instances to Cyrus’ inexperience in financial matters, in comparison to the more business-oriented Darius. Herrenschmidt (above, n.37) 93; M. Corsaro, “Autonomia cittadina e fiscalità regia: le città greche d’Asia nel sistema tributario achemenide,” in *Le tribut dans l’empire perse*. Actes de la Table Ronde de Paris 12–13 Décembre 1986 (Paris 1989) 61.

⁴⁰ Rich and poor prepare birthday banquets according to their means (1.133.1); people of different status greet each other differently in the street (1.134.1); see the hierarchy of tribes and clans at 1.125.3. P. Briant, “Hérodote et la société perse,” in G. Nenci, ed., *Hérodote et les peuples non grecs*. Entretiens XXXV. Fondation Hardt (Geneva 1988) 71–91.

⁴¹ DB 1.26–35, 4.33–40, 61–69, ##10, 54–55, 63–64; DN b 11–15, #8 in Kent (above, n.8) 119, 131–32, 140. Balcer (above, n.35) 46–47.

⁴² For the Mazdaic/Zoroastrian theme of lie/truth, see Briant (above, n.2) 124–27. It insistently recurs in Herodotus’ Book 3; see 3.21.2, 27.3, 35.1 for other references.

They see themselves as a multinational power, heir to the Median Empire;⁴³ they love quantity in every sphere (and in this they resemble their later kings);⁴⁴ they borrow much from abroad, from pederasty to Median clothes.⁴⁵ These are the same Persians who in the Preface appear to have imported heroic Greek sagas—about Io, Europa, Medea, and the Trojan War—which they manipulate as experts, as if these were their own stories.⁴⁶

Herodotus attributes to Persian aristocrats the notion that, before Cambyses “the despot,” Cyrus “the father” founded the Persian monarchy in the very act of making the Persians free and, in spite of the apparent paradox, I think that we should take him seriously.⁴⁷ This ideology pervades Herodotus’ Persian ethnography, which enhances the people’s shared practices and convictions and inserts the king into a broad societal context.⁴⁸ Here the generalized private Persian is the center of attention, managing his οἶκος by the same rules which, theoretically, also the king is bound to follow in the public sphere.⁴⁹ When the Persian makes a sacrifice, he is not allowed to pray for himself alone and rather prays for all the Persians and the king, because “he is himself one of the Persians.”⁵⁰ The *proskunēsis*

⁴³ See the analogy at 1.134.3.

⁴⁴ 1.135–136.1. For the Persian kings’ tendency to think in quantitative terms see D. Konstan, “Persians, Greeks, and Empire,” in D. Boedeker, ed., *Herodotus and the Invention of History. Arethusa*, 20 (1987) 59–70.

⁴⁵ 1.135: this passage establishes a link between the Persian ethnography and the narrative about the noble Persian Otanes, who receives the gift of a Median suit every year (3.84.1).

⁴⁶ 1.1–4. Some scholars, of course, maintain that the attribution to Persians of versions of Greek myths in this passage is entirely Herodotus’ invention; see, e.g., Fehling (above, n.21) 50–59; H. Pelliccia, “Sappho 16, Gorgias’ *Helen*, and the Preface of Herodotus’ *Histories*,” *YCIS* 29 (1992) 63–84; S. West, “Demythologizing in Herodotus,” *Xenia Toruniensia* 6 (2002) 1–48. But the Persians’ adoption of Greek heroic traditions is confirmed by Ctesias on the Trojan War in *FGrHist* 688 F 1b (22); see F 5 (32.4). On the absence of local Persian heroic traditions, see Cook (above, n.24) 200. On the Persian king’s use of Greek traditions for political reasons, see, e.g., Herodotus 7.150.1 (with 7.61.2–3); see 7.11.4, 7.43. A Persian critique of Greek myths is perhaps also detectable in the ethnography, where “the Persians say” that no one kills his father or mother (1.137.2).

⁴⁷ This argument that monarchy made the Persians free, made by Darius (3.82.5), clenches the outcome of the Constitutional Debate in favor of this form of government. See 1.126.6; 1.210.2; 3.65.7, 7.2.3. H. C. Avery, “Herodotus’ Portrait of Cyrus,” *AJP* 93 (1972), 533. For the paradox, see Pelling (above, n.30) 146. The theory that the concept of freedom is a Greek invention, recently re-formulated by O. Patterson, *Freedom in the Making of Western Culture* (New York 1991), has been much revised; see D. C. Snell, *Flight and Freedom in the Ancient Near East* (Leiden 2001).

⁴⁸ This is not the case with the only other continuous Greek description of Persian customs, in Strabo 15.3.13–24; see esp. 15.3.17 and 21. The Hippocratic treatise *Airs, Waters, Places* (22, 23, 24) though it does not specifically mention Persians, represents Asiatics in general as naturally subject to despotic rule on account of their climate.

⁴⁹ 1.137.1. In the historical narrative, the *nomos* of balancing services against offenses before punishing someone is followed by the king only once (7.194) and violated many times; see D. Lateiner, *The Historical Method of Herodotus* (Toronto 1989) 153–54, for a list of passages.

⁵⁰ ἑωυτῷ μὲν δὴ τῷ θύοντι ἰδίῃ μόνῳ οὐ οἱ ἐγγίνεται ἀρᾶσθαι ἀγαθὰ, ὁ δὲ τοῖσι πᾶσι Πέρσησι κατεύχεται εὐ γίνεσθαι καὶ τῷ βασιλεῖ ἐν γὰρ δὴ τοῖσι ἅπασιν Πέρσησι

is the proper greeting that noble Persians receive from their inferiors; there is no mention at all of royal *proskunêsis*, which the narrative elsewhere describes as a humiliating prostration to the ground only due the king.⁵¹

In our only Persian historiographic text for this period, Darius' Behistun Inscription, the king speaks in the first person about his divinely sanctioned power, his campaigns, his faithful followers (*bandaka*), and his defeated enemies. The Apadana reliefs at Persepolis show the king enthroned in the center, flanked in perfect harmony by his court and bearers of gifts.⁵² Modern historians of the Ancient Near-East more often than not speak in terms of Achaemenid ideology, history, and art ("Achaemenid" in the dynastic sense) rather than Persian. But Herodotus, more than any other source, Greek or non-Greek, allows us to hear the strong voice of men who express their Persian identity as different from, and even standing in opposition to, the ways of their kings.

In Book 3, as we have seen, some of these individuals are quite visible, but as the narrative proceeds they almost disappear. Most of the named Persians we meet form an echo-chamber for the king's policies and are inextricably tied to the benefactions he grants and exacts.⁵³ But many high-ranking Persians seem to have silently disapproved of Xerxes' decision to march against Greece (7.13.3). On the eve of the final Persian defeat at Plataea, at a banquet in Thebes, one of them, perhaps after drinking much wine, speaks out in pro-

καὶ αὐτὸς γίνεται (1.132.2) (my translation). The emphasis is on the entire community as the recipient of divine blessings; see Briant, "La Perse avant l'empire" (above, n.16) 104 and *From Cyrus to Alexander* (above, n.2) 241.

⁵¹ 1.134.1. The precise meaning of the term is debated. Royal *proskunêsis* is already performed in front of the Median king (1.119.1). For the Persian king, see 3.86.2, 7.13.13.3, 8.118.4, and especially 1.136.1: ". . . when the spear bearers commanded and tried to force [Sperthias and Boulis] to fall forward and prostrate themselves to the king (προσκυνέειν βασιλέα προσπίπτοντας) they said that not even if their head was pushed down by them would they ever do that; for it was not their custom to *proskunein* before a human being. . . ." See also the descriptions in Plut. *Them.* 27.4–5 and Aelian *VH* 1.31. On the other hand, reliefs of the Apadana building at Persepolis show a visitor bending forward slightly to the king while putting his hand to his lips. See E. J. Bickerman, "À propos d'un passage de Chares de Mytilène," *La Parola del Passato* 18 (1963) 241–55; R. N. Frye, "Gestures of Deference to Royalty in Ancient Iran," *Iranica Antiqua* 9 (1972) 102–107; Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander* (above, n.2) 222–23; L. Allen, *The Persian Empire* (Chicago 2005) 42. This seems a more realistic form of salute also between non-royal Persians in the street. Herodotus also attributes the *proskunêsis* to ordinary Egyptians, for whom it involves bowing down after placing one's hand on the knees (2.80.2).

⁵² For the representation of kingship in Achaemenid art, see M. C. Root, *The King and Kingship in Achaemenid Art: Essay on the Creation of an Iconography of Empire* (Leiden 1979) esp. 231–40.

⁵³ A notable exception, besides Artabanus (7.10–12), is Artabanus' son Tritantaechmes, who praises Greek athletic contestants for competing for excellence (ἀρετή) rather than money (8.26.3). For the Achaemenid system of benefactions and its accurate representation in Herodotus, see Briant, "Hérodote et la société perse" (above, n.40) 97–101; see *From Cyrus to Alexander* (above, n.2) 303–304.

test. The characteristic Persian self-assurance is here combined with discouragement: "Very many of us Persians just *know*, he says, but we follow constrained by necessity . . . There is no greater grief than understanding many things and having power over none."⁵⁴

Herodotus has learned this episode from a Greek source, likely the family tradition of a Theban, named Terpander, who attended the party; the speech of the anonymous Persian, as reported by Herodotus, sounds very Greek. But at the same time, the criticism of the monarchy it implies is consistent with the way we have seen other Persians in Herodotus distance themselves from their kings. In this case the criticism has to do with the king's choice to wage war, and may reflect a truer version of Persian sentiment than what Robert Graves imagined in his well-known poem.⁵⁵

IV. The Last Appearance of Cyrus

This anonymous guest, who says he is leaving his host "the memorial of [his] opinion," is the last dissenting voice and the last representative of "the Persians" in Herodotus. The reference point of these men is, consistently, Cyrus, with whom Herodotus in a surprising move has in fact chosen to end his work. Cyrus is brought back from the dead as it were, in a flashback where he advises the Persians not to covet fertile territories, because rugged countries produce tough men who are free while soft countries produce soft men who become slaves (9.122.2).

Cyrus' last speech brings us back to the times after he replaced Astyages as the ruler of Asia (9.122.2), but it is not about kings. It centers on the collectivity and its choices, presenting an ideal of austerity that the Persians, for the first time in the *Histories*, now appear to claim. The passage is hard to reconcile with Cyrus' almost contemporary promise to the Persians of continuous feasting (1.126), with his career as a conqueror, and with the ideology of prosperity

⁵⁴ 9.16.2–5. I am adapting the translation of M. Flower and J. Marincola, *Herodotus: Histories Book IX* (Cambridge 2002) 132.

⁵⁵ This is not to say that the King's power was affected by their defeats; see Bowie (above, n.2) 5. "The Persian Version" by Robert Graves goes as follows (*Collected Poems [1914–1947]* [London 1948] 210):

Truth-loving Persians do not dwell upon
The trivial skirmish fought near Marathon.
As for the Greek theatrical tradition
Which represents that summer's expedition
Not as a mere reconnaissance in force
By three brigades of foot and one of horse
(Their left flank covered by some obsolete
Light craft detached from the main Persian fleet)
But as a grandiose, ill-starred attempt
To conquer Greece—they treat it with contempt;
And only incidentally refute
Major Greek claims, by stressing what repute
The Persian monarch and Persian nation
Won by this salutary demonstration:
Despite a strong defence and adverse weather
All arms combined magnificently together.

of a people that Herodotus portrays as proud of being both wealthy and tough at the same time. But if we are left guessing about its meaning, that may partly be because this last anecdote in the *Histories* represents (with the Preface [1.1–5], the Persian ethnography, and the Constitutional Debate) a fragment of a larger ongoing conversation between mid-fifth century Persian elites and their Greek neighbors, especially in Asia, about how to be Persian, rulers and free.⁵⁶ Herodotus' record of this conversation is one of his great contributions to the history of ancient Persia.

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⁵⁶ The last chapter of the work is all based on the opposition between ἀρχεῖν and ἀρχεσθαι, with δουλεύειν as the last word (9.122.4). The emphasis on the Persians' choice parallels the choice formulated by Cyrus at 1.126.5–6. For a full discussion of this passage, see C. Dewald, "Wanton Kings, Pickled Heroes, and Gnostic Founding Fathers: Strategies of Meaning at the End of Herodotus' Histories," in D. H. Roberts, F. M. Dunn, and D. Fowler, eds., *Classical Closure: Reading the End in Greek and Latin Literature* (Princeton 1997) 62–82.

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