

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-57328-3 - Herodotus: Histories: Book VIII

Edited by A. M. Bowie

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

I MEDES AND PERSIANS

‘Darius the king says: this is the kingdom which I hold: from the Scythians who are beyond Sogdiana to Ethiopia, from Sind to Sardis’.¹ Xerxes inherited from his father an empire that stretched from the Asia Minor coast to India and from the Caucasus to the Persian Gulf, and included Egypt.² It far surpassed anything the Near East had seen before, and would not be surpassed in size until the Roman empire.³

One unusual feature of this empire is that, despite the fact that it was the successor to the Elamite, Babylonian and Assyrian empires, which made much use of at least nominally ‘historical’ texts recording the deeds of their kings, the Persian empire has left us very little of the kind.⁴ There is only one document that can be described as a historical account of specific events, Darius’ great inscription at Bisitun (DB = Brosius no. 44), which recounts his crushing of the revolts that greeted his accession to power. Other royal inscriptions list the peoples of the empire, describe the building of great palaces and outline royal ideology, but they do not concern themselves with specific events. Again, apart from the carving that accompanies DB, Achaemenid art does not use representations of individual events. Records were kept of battles, acts of benevolence towards the King etc., but these would have been on perishable material and have not survived (cf. **85.3** and n.). Two archives written in Elamite on clay are of prime importance for economic history, the Persepolis Fortification Tablets, which record the issue of provisions and livestock to workers, travellers and others for the period 509–494 BC, and the Persepolis Treasury Tablets, which record payment to workers for 492–458.⁵ We have a certain amount of material from Babylonian and Egyptian sources, and the Old Testament books of Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther are also important. However, the absence of historical accounts from the Persian point of view means we have to rely heavily on those written by their victorious opponents,

¹ DPh (=Brosius no. 134) §2; cf. DB (=Brosius no. 44) I §6, DSe (=Brosius no. 46) §3, DNa (=Brosius no. 48) §3, DPe (=Brosius no. 133) §2 for more detailed lists of up to 29 countries. Xerxes lists 31 in XPh (=Brosius no. 191) §3.

² The degree of actual control exercised over different parts of the empire did, of course, vary over time and space.

³ For magisterial surveys of the Persian Empire, see Briant 2002 (note especially the ‘research notes’ after the main text) and Kuhrt 2007. For bibliography after 1995, cf. Briant 1997: 1–127, 2001; and for a massive analytical bibliography, cf. Weber-Wiesehöfer 1996. For new Achaemenid research, cf. <http://www.achemenet.com> (it includes the ongoing *Encyclopaedia Iranica*); cf. also <http://www.museum-achemenet.college-de-france.fr/> and <http://oi.uchicago.edu/OI/default.html> for texts, images, electronic resources etc. Also useful for an overview are Cook 1983; Young, *CAH* IV 1–111; Dandamayev and Lukonin 1989; Briant 1990; Brentjes, *CANE* II 1001–21; Sancisi-Weerdenburg, *CANE* II 1035–50; Kuhrt 1995: 647–701; Wiesehöfer 1996; Cawkwell 2005; Curtis and Tallis 2005; Flower 2006. For Greece’s place in a Near Eastern–Aegean cultural community, cf. Burkert 2005.

⁴ Brosius is a very useful collection of texts in translation.

⁵ Cf. Hallock 1985.

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the Greeks.⁶ One should not operate a rigorous scepticism about anything found in a Greek source,⁷ but caution is always wise when using documents written by one people about another, especially when the writers come from one race that has unexpectedly vanquished the other, and also made great use of that victory in the construction of their self-image.⁸ Of course, uncritical acceptance of Persian sources would be equally unwise.

The Medes and Persians were amongst the peoples who appeared in the Zagros Mountains, between the Caspian Sea and the Persian Gulf, around the start of the first millennium BC. They came either from central Asia to the east or (less likely) from southern Russia to the north.⁹ The Medes and Persians were speakers of languages from the Iranian branch of Indo-European.¹⁰ The first reference to them comes in an inscription of Shalmaneser III (858–824), king of Assyria: ‘I received tribute from twenty-seven kings of the land Parsua. Moving on from the land Parsua I went down to the lands of . . . Media (*Amadaïia*).’¹¹ The name *Parsua* is connected with the region which the Persians called *Pārsa* and the Greeks *Persis*, and which is now Fars in south-west Iran.¹² In the ninth to seventh centuries we hear sketchily of the periodic defeats of Medes and Persians by the Assyrians, as they became participants in the shifting power politics and wars between the Assyrians, Babylonians, Elamites and Urartians.¹³

The picture becomes clearer from the middle of the seventh century. In 646, the Assyrians crushed Elam, the very ancient kingdom centred on Susa and Anshan, and King Ashurbanipal records that, ‘Kurash [Cyrus I], the king of the country of Parsumash, . . . sent Arukku, his eldest son, with his tribute to Nineveh, my capital city, in order to declare his obedience.’¹⁴ The Assyrian empire, however, was soon to fall,

⁶ Cf. the list of Greek sources in Brosius xx–xxi; Dandamayev and Lukonin 1989: 368–99 for a discussion of written sources; Cawkwell 2005: 1–29. Apart from Herodotus, the principal early sources on Persian history are Aeschylus’ *Persae*; Timotheus’ *Persae* (cf. Hordern 2002); the valuable but somewhat sensationalist *Persica* of Ctesias of Cnidus (*FGH* 688), a doctor at the court of Artaxerxes II from 405 to 388, which are preserved largely in paraphrase (cf. Gilmore 1885); Xenophon’s *Anabasis*, a first-hand account of the failed revolt of Cyrus the Younger against his brother Artaxerxes II in 401 and of the subsequent Greek retreat, *Cyropedia*, a treatise on good government composed through a fictionalised life of Cyrus the Great, and *Oeconomicus* gives an account of the administration of the Persian empire in §4. Also important are the *Histories* of Diodorus Siculus (books 9–11), preserving material from the earlier writers Hecataeus, Ctesias, Ephorus and Hieronymus of Cardia; Strabo’s *Geographia*, especially books 12–15 on Asia Minor and Persia and 16–17 on Egypt and Mesopotamia; Plutarch’s *Lives*, especially those of Themistocles, Aristides and Artaxerxes I (many remarks on Persian matters are scattered through his works); and Arrian’s *Anabasis of Alexander*. Cf. in general, Drews 1973; Stevenson 1997.

⁷ On Herodotus’ knowledge of Persia, cf. Miller 1997: 105–8.

⁸ Cf. §2 below. ⁹ Young 1980.

¹⁰ For Old Persian (and Median) language and texts, cf. Kent 1953; Brandenstein-Mayrhofer 1964; Lecoq 1997; for the languages of the empire, cf. Stolper 2005.

¹¹ Cf. Grayson 1996: 68.

¹² The country was ‘Persia’ until 1934, when its government requested the use of ‘Iran’, derived ultimately from OP *ariya*, ‘Aryan’ and cognate with Skt. *arya-* ‘noble’ (cf. *Eire* ‘Ireland’); cf. Wiesehöfer 1996: xi–xii.

¹³ Luckenbill 1926–7: Index, s.v. ‘Parsua’, ‘Parsuai’, ‘Parsuash’, ‘Matai’.

¹⁴ Weidner 1931/2: 4–5.

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1 MEDES AND PERSIANS

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as the Medes under Cyaxares (Median *Uvaxshtra*;¹⁵ ruled *ca.* 625–585), having in ways we do not know increased their power; captured first Ashur, the former capital and major religious centre of the Assyrian empire in 614, and then helped the Babylonians utterly destroy the capital Nineveh in 612: ‘the city [they turned] into ruin-hills and heaps (of debris)’.¹⁶ According to the traditional account, Cyaxares also took control of Persia *ca.* 625.¹⁷ He was succeeded by his son Astyages.

Persian domination then began with Cyrus II, the Great (OP *Kūrush*). He had become king of Anshan in 559, and revolted against and eventually conquered the Medes in 549,¹⁸ thus inaugurating what became the great ‘Achaemenid’ dynasty. Around 546 he conquered Lydia and its fabulously wealthy king Croesus, who by now ruled the Greek cities of the coast and much of western Anatolia (H. 1.46–94). He then campaigned successfully in eastern Iran, central Asia and Afghanistan, taking control of land as far as north-western India and the Hindu Kush. In 539/8, he conquered Babylon.¹⁹ Cyrus had therefore conquered three of the four major Near Eastern kingdoms, and was in effective control of the whole Near East apart from Egypt. Building on the complex bureaucracies of Babylon and Elam, he saw to the organisation of his enormous empire. He inaugurated the Achaemenid habit of showing considerable tolerance to local religions, customs and laws, and also the distinctively Persian, eclectic style of art and architecture, which blended features of the crafts of the peoples in his kingdom.²⁰ He probably instituted the system of ‘satraps’ (OP *xshaçapāwā*, ‘protector of the kingdom’). He was killed in 530, fighting in the east,²¹ and his tomb still stands at Pasargadae, the most ancient Achaemenid capital. The splendour of his achievements led Greek writers to chart a spiral of decline through the reigns of his successors.

Cyrus was succeeded by his son Cambyses (OP *Kambūjīya*; 530–522), who added Egypt to the empire (H. 3.1–29). The hostile account of his rule in Herodotus probably depends on traditions created by Egyptian priests angered by Cambyses’ changes to the organisation of temple finances, which were intended to reduce the power of the priesthood;²² Egyptian sources give a more complimentary picture.²³ Cambyses died of a gangrenous wound in Syria, as he was returning to Persia on learning that his brother Bardiya (Gk. *Smerdis*) had seized the throne in Persia.

¹⁵ *x* is pronounced rather like *ch* in ‘loch’.

¹⁶ Babylonian Chronicle in *ANET* 304–5; cf. Xen. *Anab.* 3.4.6–12.

¹⁷ For the problems, cf. Brown 1988; Sancisi-Weerdenburg 1994.

¹⁸ Cf. ‘Nabonidus Chronicle’ 7.2.1–2; *ANET* 305; Brosius no. 11.

¹⁹ Cf. H. 1.178–91; and the different version in the ‘Nabonidus Chronicle’ (cf. Grayson 1975: 109–110; *ANET*, 306–7; Brosius no. 11).

²⁰ Lecoq 1997: 42–50 argues that ‘Old Persian’ is also a mixture, of Persian and Median (and possibly other languages), again created to express the unity of Medes and Persians, which is expressed in art too.

²¹ There are different versions in H. 1.201–14 and Ctesias, *FGH* 688 F 9.

²² Cf. Brosius no. 24.

²³ Contrast Brosius nos. 19–22, 24 with fig. 3 with H. 3.25–30, 37; cf. Fried 2004: 68–73.

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The events surrounding the succession of Darius (OP *Dārayavaush*, ‘He who holds firm the good’) are very murky. According to both Darius (DB (= Brosius no. 44) 1 §§29–32) and Herodotus (3.30.3), Cambyes had secretly killed his brother Bardiya, but Gaumata, a Median Magus, took Bardiya’s identity and seized the throne; he was then overthrown by Darius and his fellow conspirators. What really happened cannot be divined, since the main source is from the winning side. Revolts in at least nine different parts of the empire, including Babylon, Persia, Media, Elam and Assyria, suggest general turmoil in the empire, which Darius may have exploited. By June 521, he had crushed them all: ‘this is what I have done by the favour of Ahura Mazda in one and the same year, after I became king’ (DB (= Brosius no. 44) iv §52).

Darius was not of Cyrus’ family and so not in line to succeed. When on the throne, he was keen to assert his legitimacy. He invented an ancestor Achaemenes (*Haxāmanish*) as father both of Teispes (OP *Cishpish*), great-grandfather of Cyrus, and of his own ancestor Ariaramnes, thus making his family part of the same ‘Achaemenid’ line as Cyrus (DB (= Brosius no. 44) 1 §§1–2). Cyrus is described as ‘an Achaemenid’ at Pasargadae, on inscriptions which are attributed to him but may have been made by Darius (C*Ma-c*).²⁴ Darius also married two daughters of Cyrus, Atossa and Artystone (Elam. *Irtašhduna*), and a granddaughter, Parmys. It was Darius who consolidated the empire by campaigns in countries at the edges of it, such as India and Scythia (H. 4.1–143). He also gave the empire the accoutrements expressive of its greatness. He began immense palaces at Persepolis and Susa, which were built and decorated by the many peoples of the empire, the mixture of styles symbolising the heterogeneity yet unity of the empire (DS*f* (= Brosius no. 45) §4). The spectacular decorations on the Audience Hall (*Apadāna*) at Persepolis and those on Darius’ tomb at Naqsh-e Rostam convey a timeless sense of harmony between King and peoples.²⁵ Darius ordered major engineering works, such as the building of the Bosphorus bridge, involving 200 ships carrying a road across a strait with powerful current and winds (4.85), and the restoration of the Nile canal (2.158.1–2). He may have developed the Old Persian cuneiform to give his empire its own script, which his inscriptions carry alongside the old Babylonian and Elamite cuneiforms, implying an equivalence of prestige. In religious matters, he seems to have made Zoroastrianism and its main god Ahura Mazda a central feature of Persian religion, perhaps as a focus of loyalty to his regime (cf. **115.4n**).

In Darius’ time the Persians begin to take control of the Greek islands and areas of the mainland. In 499/8 the Ionians revolted against their Persian masters, and this ‘Ionian revolt’ lasted till 493.²⁶ Athens and Eretria sent ships to help the Ionians. The Greeks succeeded in burning the lower town of Sardis, but the revolt, never notable for its unity of purpose or loyalty to the cause, collapsed when the Persians

²⁴ An idea opposed by Lecoq 1997: 81–2.

²⁵ Cf. Root 1979: esp. 131–61. It is noteworthy that the Achaemenids did not refer to their ‘empire’ but rather to *dahyāva*, ‘peoples’.

²⁶ Cf. Tozzi 1978; Murray, *CAH*² iv 461–90; Georges 2000; Cawkwell 2005: 61–86.

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captured Miletus and the Greek fleet was defeated at Lade nearby. Severe reprisals followed, but inter-Ionian hostilities were curbed, taxation revised and a measure of self-rule instituted (6.42–3). Darius sought to punish Athens and Eretria, and in 490 sent Datis (Elam. *Datiya*) and Artaphernes (Elam. *Irdapirna*) to attack mainland Greece. They were repulsed at Marathon, but Darius planned a further attempt, which was interrupted by his death in 486.

His successor was his son by Atossa, Xerxes (OP *Xshayārshā* ‘ruling over heroes’; Elam. *Iksherishsha*; OT Ahasuerus). Though not the eldest of Darius’ sons, he was the eldest of those born to a wife who was a daughter of Cyrus; choosing Xerxes thus meant the kingship remained in the Achaemenid family.²⁷ His attack on Greece has resulted in Xerxes generally being given a very poor reputation in subsequent western accounts and conceptions of the East, but this does not accurately reflect his reign.²⁸ He preserved the empire as he had inherited it, and completed the palaces at Susa and Persepolis. His engineering projects were monumental. For his invasion of Greece, he caused to be dug through the Athos peninsula a canal which was 2200 m long and 20 m wide, so that triremes could row past each other. He also made a bridge over the Hellespont, which involved 674 warships anchored under hemp and papyrus cables, a feat that has never been repeated to this day. The four-year planning of the expedition, the marshalling of his vast army from Cappadocia to Athens and the co-ordination with the huge fleet were also extraordinary feats of military organisation.

The defeat, for which Mardonius must take a large share of the blame, appears not to have affected Xerxes’ rule:²⁹ it is too easy to exaggerate the interest the Persians had in Greece, a very small country on the edge of their vast empire. Indeed, there is some evidence that it may have been presented as something of a triumph. Booty was set up in various capitals: for instance, the statues of the tyrannicides Harmodius and Aristogeiton, taken from Athens, were displayed in Babylon, whence they were returned by Alexander.³⁰ Xerxes could after all point to his defeat and killing of one Spartan king at Thermopylae and to the destruction of Athens, which was one of his prime objectives (7.8β.3). The failure of the expedition could be also compared to those of Cyrus against the Massagetae, Cambyses in Egypt and Darius in Scythia: Xerxes was in distinguished company. He continued as King until August 465, when he was the first Achaemenid king (unless we count Bardiya/Smerdis) to be assassinated, in a palace coup. His son Arsēs succeeded as Artaxerxes I (OP *Artaxšaçā*),³¹ and the Achaemenid

²⁷ Cf. Sancisi-Weerdenburg 1993. Xerxes’ comment was ‘other sons of Darius there were, (but) it was the desire of Ahura Mazda that my father Darius made me the greatest after himself (XPF §4 (= Brosius no. 107)); cf. H. 7.3.

²⁸ Current scholarship is convincingly revaluing his reign: cf. Wiesehöfer 1996: 42–55; Briant 2002: 515–68.

²⁹ Cf. Young 1980 and Briant 2002: 535–42 for attempts to look at this outcome from the Persian perspective; cf. 97n. on a possible reason for Xerxes’ flight from Greece after Salamis.

³⁰ Arrian, *Anab.* 7.19.2; cf. 3.16.7–8; Paus. 1.8.5, and cf. 16.3, 8.46.3 for the bronze Apollo of Branchidae.

³¹ For Achaemenid throne-names, cf. Ctesias, *FGH* 688 F 15 §50–1, 55; Plut. *Art.* 1.2; Schmitt 1982.

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empire continued until Alexander's final defeat of Darius III at Gaugamela (Syria) in 331.

2 GREEKS AND PERSIANS

In her account of Aeschylus' presentation of the Persians in the *Persae*, Edith Hall identifies three main psychological flaws attributed to them, hierarchicalism, immoderate luxuriousness and unrestrained emotionalism;³² matters are different in Herodotus.³³

It is true that these features may be found in his Persians, but they are not the defining features. There is indeed a very strong hierarchical element in the Persians' view of the world:

After themselves, they hold their immediate neighbours in the highest regard, then those who live the next furthest away, and so on in order of proximity; so they have the least respect for those who live furthest away from their own land. The reason for this is that they regard themselves as by far the best people in the world in all respects, and others as gradually decreasing in goodness, so that those who live the furthest away from them are the worst people in the world.

(1.134.2; tr. Waterfield)

This is also reflected in their social relations: meetings between equals are accompanied by a kiss on the lips, between those slightly distinguished in rank by a kiss on the cheek and between those of divergent standing by *proskynesis* by the lower ranker (1.134.1).³⁴ It is plain too that the King stands at the head of the hierarchy. On the other hand, though courtiers are respectful to the King, they do not in Herodotus fawn upon him in quite the way characters do in Aeschylus' play, and some speak their minds with complete openness, as in Achaemenes' rude dismissal of Demaratus' advice to Xerxes to occupy the island of Cythera (7.236), or Artemisia's forthright opposition to a strategy at Salamis supported by Xerxes himself (68). Even Mardonius' immensely courtly speech at 100 is steeped in self-interest. The King is often found consulting his closest associates, and even accepting their advice, despite a sense that a minority opinion may be wiser (69.2).

Eastern luxuriousness as opposed to Greek poverty and austerity is a cliché of Greek thinking which has echoes as early as epic representations of Troy and the Trojans, and such luxuriousness can indeed be found in Herodotus. Cyrus establishes his empire by offering the Persians the choice between the life of the banquet and that of slavish toil (1.126), and certain Persians when lavishly entertained by Amyntas, king of Macedonia, molest the Macedonians' wives, claiming this to be the Persian custom

³² Hall 1989: 80.

³³ On Herodotus' depiction of Greeks and Persians, cf. Momigliano 1979; Hartog 1988; Hall 1989; Cartledge 1990; Pelling 1997a (especially for the deconstruction of this opposition); Harrison 2002b.

³⁴ On *proskynesis*, cf. 118.4.

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(5.18). Most famously, after Plataea, the Spartan king Pausanias, on discovering the fabulously caparisoned tent of Xerxes, has Persian and Greek cooks each produce a typical meal, to 'display the folly of the leader of the Medes, who, though he enjoyed such a lifestyle as this, came to take away the pitiful one that is ours' (9.82.3). On the other hand, this aspect of the Persians is not over-emphasised by Herodotus. Xerxes' expeditionary force is described in all its finery (7.40–1, 59–100) but, though its grandeur will have had a hybristic aspect in Greek eyes, Herodotus does not make any explicit comment. Many of the formal occasions on which Xerxes appears before his army will have been spectacular events, but Herodotus does not emphasise this (cf. 67.2n). The work ends with Cyrus' warning that, if the Persians abandon their poor land for more fertile pastures, they will end up slaves (9.122).

Nor is unrestrained emotionalism a regular feature of Persian behaviour. Xerxes bursts into tears at his review when he realises that all his great force will be dead in a hundred years (7.44–6), but he is not given to tears elsewhere, more to laughter (114.2n.). He can react violently, as when he has Pythius' eldest son cut in half because of an inappropriate request (7.38–9), but this is not a feature restricted to Persians (cf. 9.5 and 9.120.4 for similar Greek savagery). Outpourings of lamentation and mourning are an especial trait of Aeschylus' Persians; there are two occasions when Herodotus' Persians also give themselves over to similar emotion, when news of the defeat at Salamis is brought (99.2) and when Masistius is killed (9.24), but the description is brief, and the grief understandable in the circumstances.

Recent work has begun to stress how Herodotus breaks down any simple opposition between Greeks and Persians. The ideology of Persian and Greek is sometimes explicitly contrasted, notably in Demaratus' discussion with Xerxes in 7.101–5. Demaratus speaks of Greek freedom and respect for *nomos*: 'they are free, but not wholly so, since there is a master over them, Law, which they fear much more than your men do you' (104.4). Xerxes praises tyranny: the Greeks 'under the rule of one man, as is our way, might through fear of him show unnatural courage, and compelled by whips might confront greater numbers in battle' (103.4).³⁵ However, this opposition is not as clear-cut as it may appear. Demaratus is not speaking about all Greeks, but only the Spartans (102.1–2), and even they at times show reluctance to fight (72.m., 9.6–11, 46–9). Though the Persians do sometimes fight under the whip (7.223.3), the improved Persian performance under Xerxes' gaze at Salamis (86) supports his argument, and immediately after this debate, Herodotus gives two examples of entirely voluntary and unshakable loyalty to the King in Mascames and Boges (106–7). Nor are the Persians notably deficient in courage: they are no less tentative than the Greeks at Artemisium, and after Salamis both sides are shown to be frightened of entering unfamiliar territory (132.3). At Salamis, it is their disorder which causes their defeat (86), and at Plataea, they again advanced 'in no sort of order or array' (9.59.2), but 'were not inferior in courage or strength, but they wore no armour and were also

³⁵ Cf. 5.78, where the Athenians are said to have become the best fighters once they had thrown off tyranny.

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less experienced and could not match the skill (*sophia*) of their opponents' (9.62.3); at Mycale too, they held out for a long time, before all but the ethnic Persians fled (9.102.3).

In Persian debates, there is sometimes the suggestion that speaking openly and frankly to the King is dangerous (65.5n.), and this is implicitly contrasted with Greek *isegorie* ('the equal right to speak' enjoyed by all men; cf. 5.78). But in the debate in 59–64, Themistocles is explicitly said to be unable to speak openly (60 *init.*), and an attempt is even made to forbid him to speak at all (59). We noted above Xerxes' command that the view of the majority on Salamis should be followed (69.2), and it is Themistocles the Greek who acts in an autocratic manner. It is notable too that it is the Persians Artaphernes and Mardonius who forced the Ionians to use law rather than violence to settle their disputes, and introduced 'democracies' (7.42–3).

In 144.2, the Athenians nobly state that one reason for their refusal to come to terms with Xerxes is 'Greekness (*to Hellenikon*), which shares one blood and one language, the shrines of the gods and sacrifices we have in common, and the similarity of our customs', but this is somewhat tarnished when, finding the Spartans have not sent help, they threaten to go over to Persia (9.6–11). Indeed, throughout books 5–9, the fissiparous nature of the Greeks is constantly emphasised, not least in the Ionian Revolt, and in book 6 in particular the Greeks treat each other abominably: note especially the shameful treatment of the people of Zancle by the Samians to whom they had offered a home, and the contrast between such actions and the behaviour of Datis there and elsewhere in the book (6.22–4). Herodotus puts down the troubles that befell the Greeks in the century between Darius and Artaxerxes I (522–424) 'in part to the Persians, but in part to the wars fought by the leading nations for supremacy' (6.98.2). There is therefore no simple opposition between admirable Greeks and deficient Persians.

3 XERXES IN HERODOTUS

Greek accounts of the expedition were to give Xerxes³⁶ a reputation for arrogance, excess and intolerance from which scholarship has only recently begun to free him.³⁷ In Aeschylus, he is the inadequate son of the great Darius, who destroys his empire by his miscalculations and returns to his mother in ragged shame.³⁸ Herodotus' account of Persian history has been interpreted as structured on a series of eastern potentates, all with an overreaching ambition, but with Xerxes as the epitome of the flawed king.³⁹ His expedition has been depicted as the final example of the tendency of Persian kings

³⁶ References in this section are to book 7 unless it is otherwise stated.

³⁷ Cf. Wiesehöfer 1996: 43–55; Sancisi-Weerdenburg 2002.

³⁸ For a comparison of Aeschylus' and Herodotus' portrayal of Xerxes, cf. Saïd 2002: 137–45.

³⁹ Cf. Immerwahr 1966: 176–83.

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3 XERXES IN HERODOTUS

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to overstep one too many boundaries,⁴⁰ and his comprehensive defeat has been seen as surpassing all of the earlier defeats, in a final demonstration of the unwisdom of imperial expansionism. These views need some qualification.

Book 7 provides the background to Xerxes in book 8, and presents Xerxes undertaking his expedition in response to a number of pressures, internal and external, divine and human, which leave him little room for manoeuvre.⁴¹ It is true that Xerxes does act at times like a wilful tyrant, but for each action that supports that idea, there is often another that negates it. If he insults Artabanus for opposing his wish to invade Greece (11.1), he sends him home with honour from the Hellespont (52.2). He may act inconsistently in first rewarding royally a benefactor, Pythius the Lydian, and then, in anger at Pythius' request for one son to be spared the expedition, cutting his eldest son in half (27–9, 38–9), and he may abuse Leonidas' corpse savagely (238); but he also declines to punish Spartan heralds who fail to show him reverence, thereby refusing to imitate the Spartans' killing of Persian heralds and acting, as Herodotus says, 'with greatness of heart' (ὑπὸ μεγαλοφροσύνης, 136.2, cf. 134–7). He also saves captured Spartan spies from execution by his own generals (145–7). If he flogs, fetters and abuses the Hellespont (35), he makes sumptuous offerings to it as he crosses (53–4). If he makes dangerously arrogant claims, such as 'we will make the land of Persia border on Zeus's aether' (8γ.1), he can also weep at the shortness of human life and at the thought that all on his great and impressive expedition will be dead in a hundred years (45–46.2).

The question of whether the expedition should be undertaken is examined in a detailed and sophisticated manner by Herodotus.⁴² Initially reluctant to concern himself with Greece (5.1), Xerxes comes under a variety of pressures, internal and external. Exiled Greeks encourage him, seeking the restoration of their rule (6), as does the powerful Persian Mardonius, who sees Greece as potentially his personal fiefdom (5). Furthermore, as Xerxes says himself, being a new king, he must establish himself as worthy of his highly successful predecessors: put another way, he must satisfy the Persian nobility who look to him for their own continued wealth and power, and he must cement his own position by increasing the Persian dominions and their tribute. There is also the unfinished business of his father's planned vengeance on the Greeks (8α.2).

His uncle Artabanus, as a 'warner',⁴³ counsels caution (10). In this, he has been seen as the wise counsellor who knows the truth, with Xerxes' refusal to follow it as a sign of his flawed nature. But there is an artificiality about Artabanus' words, in that his predictions are *too* accurate and so obviously the product of hindsight (cf. esp. 8β.2, 10ε, 10θ, 49). This perception of their artificiality puts them into perspective: they are

⁴⁰ Cf. Boedeker 1988.

⁴¹ On motivation in Herodotus generally, cf. Baragwanath 2005; for Xerxes, cf. 219–61.

⁴² Cf. de Jong 2001 for a narratological analysis of this debate and how Herodotus uses prolepses and analepses to comment on Xerxes' decision.

⁴³ Cf. Bischoff 1932; Lattimore 1939; cf. 54n.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-57328-3 - Herodotus: Histories: Book VIII

Edited by A. M. Bowie

Excerpt

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not necessarily what any sensible man would have thought. In response, Xerxes looks for justification to the past. The Persians have succeeded because, 'ever since we took our kingdom from the Medes, we have never stayed still' (8α.1), and

it is better to be courageous in everything and to suffer half of what one fears, than to be fearful of everything and never to suffer anything . . . How can one who is mortal know what is sure? I do not think he can. However, the prizes tend generally to go to those who are willing to act, but not to those who consider everything and hesitate . . . Great achievements are usually attained through great dangers. (50.1–3)

These sentiments would not be out of place in the mouth of a Homeric hero.

Furthermore, four dreams add their own considerable pressures for invasion. Xerxes ignores the first's warnings (12–13), but a second makes it plain that if he does not invade, 'just as you became mighty and powerful in a short time, so you will be as quickly reduced to insignificance' (14). To test Artabanus' claim that dreams can simply be the reflection of matters uppermost in a man's mind (16β.2), Artabanus is dressed up as Xerxes; the dream-figure gives a similar warning, and reinforces the message by trying to burn out his eyes (17). This figure also accuses Artabanus of obstructing 'what must be' (τὸ χρεὸν γένεσθαι), an ominous indication that Xerxes has no choice in the matter of invasion, and that disaster will follow. All this does not suggest an unthinking act of aggrandisement by a greedy and hybriatic tyrant.

Once on campaign, the Spartan Demaratus takes the place of Artabanus as Xerxes' adviser. Xerxes rejects his arguments with laughter (114.2n.), but always with reasons for doing so. At the end of the book, Demaratus advises Xerxes to use part of his fleet to attack the Peloponnese from the island of Cythera, but Xerxes prefers the advice of Achaemenes, who argues against giving up their numerical superiority by dividing the fleet (234–7). Again, with hindsight Demaratus' idea might have been a good one, but there is no glaring tactical error here, since the Persians did rely on force of numbers in battle.

The episodes featuring Xerxes in book 8 are dealt with in the commentary. He makes a final major appearance in the erotic intrigues of 9.108–13.⁴⁴ Failing to seduce his brother Masistes' wife, Xerxes marries his son to Masistes' daughter and seduces her. He promises her any gift and, 'because she and all her house were doomed to an evil end' (109.2), she insists on the robe Xerxes' wife Amestris had woven him, and wears it openly. Amestris presumes Masistes' wife is to blame, and at Xerxes' birthday feast, when custom compelled him grant any request, demands Masistes' wife, whom she mutilates horribly. Xerxes advises an unaware Masistes to repudiate his wife and marry one of Xerxes' daughters; he refuses and, suspecting danger, takes his sons and

⁴⁴ For a historical interpretation of this story as reflecting a usurpation attempt by Xerxes' eldest brother Ariamenes, cf. Wieshöfer 1996: 52–3 summarising arguments from Sancisi-Weerdenburg 1980. The motif of wearing the King's robe is repeated from the start of the narrative of Xerxes' reign. Cf. also F&M on 9.108–13.