



DEMOCEDES

DEMOCEDES (Gk. Dēmokédēs), Greek physician attached to the court of Darius I (q.v.) and praised as “the most skillful physician of his time” by Herodotus (3.125.1). He was born in Croton in southern Italy, the son of Calliphon, a priest of Asclepius in Cnidus. Democedes seems to have worked first as a physician in the civil service of Aegina and Athens before entering the service of Polycrates, the famous tyrant of Samos (Herodotus, 3.131.1-2). Around 522 B.C.E. he, together with Polycrates and his entourage (3.125.2-3), fell into the hands of the Lydian satrap Oroites and was sent as a captive to Susa (3.129.1).

Herodotus described the career of Democedes in great detail, obviously from reliable sources (perhaps oral reports that he heard in Magna Grecia). He once healed, without further trauma, a sprained ankle that Darius had received while hunting and that his Egyptian physicians were unable to treat (3.129.1-130.5). As a result, Democedes received immense rewards; he was held in high esteem at court and, despite his foreign origin, ate in the presence of the king. Democedes was thus the first of a series of Greek physicians at the Persian court; although he lived in luxury, he nevertheless wanted to return to Greece, but his requests were denied (3.132). He apparently remained in Persia for several years and at some point cured Darius’ wife Atossa, daughter of Cyrus the Great (qq.v.), of a breast ulcer (3.133). As a reward he was permitted to go to Greece, with fifteen Persian noblemen and three Phoenician ships, to conduct a preliminary reconnaissance of the coastal regions for a planned military campaign (3.133.2-136). After completing most of the



assignment the party stopped at Tarentum, and Democedes escaped, with the help of Aristophilides, the Tarentinian king. He returned to his native Croton, where he was protected from Persian recapture (3.136-137.4), and soon married the daughter of the famous wrestler Milon (3.137.5); the other Persian agents returned to Persia with their reports and maps (3.138.1).

Almost no useful additional information is to be found in other sources (Himerius *apud* Photius, *Bibliotheca* 243, ed. Bekker, p. 376a34; Timaeus *apud* Athenaeus, 12.522b-c; Aelian, *Varia Historia* 8.17; Dio Cassius, 38.18.5; Dio Chrysostom, 77/78.10-11; Suda, s.v. Dēmokédēs; Tzetzes, *Chiliades* 3.544-60). Only Iamblichus (*De Vita Pythagorica* 257, 261) touched upon another aspect of Democedes' biography.

It seems probable that, like Ctesias (q.v.) a century later, Democedes was the ultimate source for a number of Greek narratives about internal matters at the Persian court and especially the harem, though it is not certain that he left even any medical writings.

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