



HERODOTUS III. DEFINING THE PERSIANS

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E'thnos “people.” In the Histories the Persians are sometimes not exactly distinguishable from other peoples of their empire, especially when the Greeks’ opponents are simply qualified as “Persians.” The Persians generally are run together with the Medes, as can be recognized by Herodotus’s use of the terms *mēdízein* and *mēdismós* (Myres, 1936; Graf, 1984; Tuplin, 1994, 1997; Rollinger, 2003). He also states that the Persians have adopted Median attire (1.35; Armayor, 1978c, p. 5). Both Medes and Persians are qualified by Herodotus as an *éthnos*, and he lists six *génea* for each, respectively. (The *génea* may be understood as a descent group. For the use of *éthnos* and *génea* in Herodotus, see Jones, 1996; Tanck, 1997). The Median *génea* are: Boûsai, Parētakēnoí, Stróuxates, Arizantoí, Bouídioi, Mágoi (1.101). The Persian are Pasargádai, Maráphioi, Máspioi, Panthialaíoi, Dērousiaíoi, Germánioi (1.125.3-4; cf. Briant, 1984, pp. 102-18; Erbse, 1992, pp. 181-89; Schmitt, 1996). The first three Persian *génea* are the leading ones, of whom the Pasargádai are said to be the most noble (*áristoi*). Only for them Herodotus adduces a clan lineage group (*phrétrē*), which is called Axaimenídai (Schmitt, 1987), a distinctive part of whom are the Perseídai, the Persian kings (Rollinger, 1998 [1999], p. 188). Herodotus does not provide a direct genealogical line leading



from this dim and distant era into the historically clearer past. These Persian *génea* are qualified as farmers (*arotéres*), but he also lists four nomadic ones: Dáoi, Márdoi, Dropikoí, Sagártioi. Later the Sagártioi are described as being Persian in speech but only half-Persian in respect to their war equipment (7.85.1). Thus Herodotus draws the picture of a stratified *éthnos* with different economic and social levels (Bichler, 2000b, p. 218).

History. According to Herodotus it was not until the appearance of Cyrus the Great that the Persians acquired a visible profile and emerged from the shadows of history. They thus came forth as actors in some of the monumental events in the history of Asia, involving several opposing and alternating imperial power factions, which were finally to merge within the imperium of Cyrus and his successors. (For the succession of [three] empires in history as an idea of Herodotus, see Wiesehöfer, 2003.) For these events the separation between an upper and a lower Asia, divided by the Halys River, plays an important part in the Histories. These territories had been occupied by Lydians and Assyrians in the past; with the decline of the Assyrians, the dominion was divided across upper Asia, with the Medes acting as the decisive force. A territory of the Babylonians remains shadowy (Bichler, 2000b, pp. 228-55; Liverani, 2003; Rollinger, 2003). Herodotus presents Persian history as primarily the history of the Persian kings from Cyrus to Xerxes with some glimpses also of the time of Artaxerxes I (Bichler, 2000b, pp. 366-77).

Mythical origins. In the Histories we catch a glimpse of a Greek tradition of myths, in the presentation of which Herodotus must have played an essential part. There the great actors of Asia's history are all connected with one another through relationships going back to legendary times. Just as Hesiod (F 35; R. Merkelbach and M. L. West, eds., *Fragmenta Hesiodica*, Oxford, 1967) pretended that Cepheus was the son-in-law of Perseus (Fehling, 1989, pp. 36 f.), so we sense that Herodotus believes in a connection based on folk etymology between Persians and Perseus, according to which the Persians were once called Kephenes by the Greeks, while they referred to themselves as Artaeans. Cepheus was presented as the father of Andromeda and father-in-law of Perseus. From the marriage of the latter, Perseus, the progenitor of the Persians, was said to have been born; and he was brought up by his maternal grandfather. Herodotus offers this mythical-genealogical reconstruction comparatively late, in the context of Xerxes' military review (7.61.2-3; Bichler 2000b, pp. 255 f.; see also Vannicelli, 2001).

Customs. The *nomoi* of the Persians are treated in a minor *logos* (Histories



1.131-40). Herodotus's description starts with the religious beliefs. The Persians have neither images of gods (*ágalma*; concerning the terminology, cf. Scheer, 2000, pp. 8-34) nor temples or altars. They deny anthropomorphism, and they pay homage to the elements—sun, moon, earth, fire, water, and wind. The only god they know from the beginning is Zeus, who is equated with the “firmament” (*ho kýklos pás toû ouranoû*) and is worshipped on the tops of the mountains. Later also Aphrodite Urania received sacrifices, a practice which could have been adopted from the Assyrians and Arabs. Herodotus says the Persians call this female goddess Mitra (1.131). He stresses the differences from Greek religious behavior, with the Persians exhibiting a natural and primeval form of religion. It has long been noticed that, besides firmament, sun, and moon, Herodotus's Persians adore the four fundamental elements of early Greek natural philosophy (cf. Wolff, 1934/1982, pp. 406-7; Burkert, 1990b, p. 21). The alleged denial of anthropomorphism has been questioned (Jacobs, 2001; see also Schnapp, 2000). The female Mitra has caused debate regarding Herodotus's knowledge of Persian customs (cf. Rollinger and Hämeen-Anttila, 2001, pp. 93 f.; on the question of a confusion between Mitra and Anahita, see Corsten, 1991).

The sacrifices are in every respect opposite to Greek customs: no altars, no burnt offerings, no libations, no pipe music, no garlands, no sacrificial barleycorn (*oulai*). The sacrificer takes the animal to a ritually pure place (*xôros katharós*), usually with myrtle branches on his tiara. He prays, not only for himself, but for all Persians and the king. The animal's flesh is cut, boiled, and put on fresh grass, often clover. The Magus sings a theogony. Thereafter the sacrificer takes the flesh with him and does as he likes with it (1.132; cf. Dandamayev, 1985, p. 97; Briant, 1996, pp. 256-58; Bichler, 2000b, p. 219). Herodotus describes the rites that preceded Xerxes' crossing of the Hellespont: The Persians wait for the rising sun. Then they burn incense (*thymiémata*) and strew myrtle branches on the road. Xerxes pours a libation from a golden drinking bowl (*phiā'le*) and prays to the sun. Afterwards he throws the drinking bowl as well as a large bowl (*kretér*) and a Persian sword (*akinákēs*) into the Hellespont (7.54).

Birthdays are celebrated with a special meal; on such occasions the richer people eat cow, horse, camel, and donkey meat. The Persians do not know many different kinds of main courses but have a lot of desserts (*epiphorémata*). Again the difference in comparison with Greek customs is underlined. Wine they like very much. To vomit or to urinate in the presence



of others is prohibited. They are used to negotiating while in a drunken condition, but the decision is confirmed when they are sober, and vice versa (1.133; cf. Wolff, 1934/1982, p. 407; Bichler 2000b, p. 220; Mauritsch-Bein, 2002, pp. 80-93). In 3.22.4 Herodotus has the Ichthyophagi report to the king of the Ethiopians that the Persian king is used to eating bread (*ártos*) baked from wheat (*pyrós*). They also explain that in Persia no one becomes more than eighty years old.

When two individuals meet, the greeting formula expresses their equal or unequal status. They do not speak; rather, equals kiss each other on the mouth, unequals on the cheek; and they even practice obeisance (*proskýnēsis*). The closest neighboring peoples are the ones they most honor, for they take themselves to be the best (*áristos*) of all men and believe that excellence (*areté*) diminishes with the distance from their homeland (1.134; cf. Bichler, 2000b, p. 226, who recognizes a projection of Greek ethnocentrism). Herodotus underscores the differences in status among the Persians in various parts of his work. For instance, noble Persians ride in litters (*diphrophoreúmenoi* [3.146.3]; Briant, 1996, pp. 235, 346-48; Bichler, 2000b, p. 220). In contrast to such luxury, Herodotus has already had Sandanis introduce the Persians' homeland as a rough and barren one, where men wear leathern trousers and do not drink wine but water, where they do not eat as much as they want but as much as they have, and delicacies are practically unknown (1.71; cf. Bichler, 2000b, p. 222).

The Persians are very willingly to adopt foreign customs. They wear Median dress, and in war they use Egyptian breastplates (*thórēx*). They eagerly adopt all enjoy-ments and pleasures they get acquainted with. From the Greeks they learned paidophilia (1.135). They have many wedded wives (*kouridiē gynē*), as well as concubines (*pallakē*). While they regard fighting well in battle as the highest manly virtue, next to that, it is highly esteemed to have many children. Every year the king rewards the man who has the most children with a gift. Between the age of five and twenty the sons (*paídes*) are specially educated in three subjects: horsemanship, archery, and telling the truth. The younger boys have no contact with their fathers; they grow up with their mothers (1.136).

With the topic of legitimate polygamy Herodotus touches upon an allegedly characteristic aspect of Persian life; it is ubiquitous in the Histories and has a vivid *Wirkungsgeschichte* (Sancisi-Weerdenburg, 1983; Briant, 1989; Brosius, 1996). Delicate affairs are reported many times as being discussed in the king's harem (cf. 3.68-69, 3.84.2, 3.130.4-5, 9.108-13). This is also true for the motif of



the castration of young boys (cf. 3.92.1, 8.105.2), as well as for that of the presence of eunuchs at the king's court (3.77.2). (Concerning the historical background of the eunuchs, cf. the different standpoints achieved by using classical or indigenous sources: Grayson, 1995 versus Deller, 1999. See further Briant, 1996, pp. 347-48; Hutzfeldt, 1999, pp. 99-100; Bichler, 2000b, pp. 220-21.)

The king is not allowed to have a Persian executed, and no Persian is allowed to do harm to his subjects. Each criminal case has to be checked accurately; and then punishment may be carried out only if the merits of a subject are considered to be less than his offences. Such an alleged usage (*nomos*), indicating the king's limited rights in relation to his subjects, presents a vivid contrast to the behavior of later Persian kings such as Cambyses and Xerxes (Bichler, 2000b, pp. 224-25). Compare the Persians' own statement that they do not know a single case of murdering father or mother (1.137); this may be considered as a critique of Greek tradition, in which Oedipus and Orestes appear as tragic heroes (Bichler, 2000b, p. 219).

The Persians are not allowed to even talk about matters which are forbidden. Lying (*pseúdesthai*) carries the highest blame, followed by indebtedness (*tò opheileîn xréos*), because a debtor is forced to lie. If someone suffers from any kind of leprosy (*léprēn èleúkēn*), he is forbidden to enter the town or even to come into contact with other people. Illness is considered as resulting from a crime against the sun. They do not urinate or spit into rivers, and even washing one's hands in rivers is regarded as a sacrilege, because rivers are worshipped (1.138; cf. Briant, 1996, pp. 277-78). In addition to the prohibition against debts, Herodotus later reports that the Persians are not even acquainted with buying and selling in markets (1.153.2; cf. Dandamayev, 1985, p. 96).

Herodotus mentions (1.139) an alleged Persian peculiarity recognized by the Greeks but not by the Persians themselves. All proper names relating to the body or to nobility end on a sigma. This statement has long been taken as an indication of not very good knowledge about the Persian language. Herodotus's popular etymologies of the names of the Persian kings Darius, Xerxes, and Artaxerxes are similarly regarded (6.98.2; Schmitt, 1967, 1971; Schmeja, 1974, 1975; Harrison, 1998). Hegyi (1973) even concluded that Herodotus got most of his information on Persia and the Persians from a linguistically uniform source originating in western Anatolia.

Lastly, Herodotus reports the Persians' burial customs, which they are said to



keep secret. However, he at least could obtain the information that they expose their dead to dogs and birds before they are buried. All this is done by the Magi. Afterwards they cover the corpse in wax, and it is buried. The Magi are characterized by specific modes of behavior different from all other men. They are allowed to kill all living beings, except for dog and man, with their own hands. They vie in eating ants, snakes, all creeping things, and fowls of the air (1.140). (Cf. Briant, 1996, pp. 106-7, 538-39. Concerning the Magi see Schmitt, 1990; de Jong, 1997; Bremmer, 1999; Piras, 1999; Burkert, 2003, pp. 107-33.)

Besides these concentrated chapters on Persian *nomoi*, Herodotus also treats Persian customs in other parts of his work. In 3.2.2 he reports the importance of royal geneology. A bastard (*nóthos*) cannot become a Persian king (cf. Briant, 1996, p. 797). This point is to some degree supported later, where Herodotus notes that the Persians hold a royal lineage in esteem and thus prefer to appoint members of subjugated dynasties as satraps (3.15). When the Persian king goes to war, he first has to appoint another king according to the Persian *nomos*. The custom of marriage between brothers and sisters is described as having been introduced by Cambyses (3.31). Royal judges are selected Persians, who are appointed for their lifetime and who maintain the ancestral laws (*thesmoì pátrioi*). Their special function is to advise the king. The rotation of wives in the bedchamber seems a widely practiced custom (3.69.6). Women usually take part at meals, even when strangers are present (5.18.2). Every year the Persians commemorate their victory over the Medes by celebrating the feast of Magophonia (*magophónia* [3.79.3]; cf. Briant, 2001, p. 115). The Persians do not have to pay tribute (3.97.1; cf. Gschnitzer, 1988; Wiesehöfer, 1989). During wartime, a special council of war seems to have some importance (8.69). The Persian dress for war and the military equipment are described in 7.61. The elite troops are called the Ten Thousand (*myríoi*) or Immortals (*athánatoi*; 7.83). The *orosángai* constitute a circle of highly esteemed persons to whom the king presents special grants (3.85.3; Wiesehöfer, 1980). The king's birthday is celebrated every year in a feast called *tyktá* (9.110-11; cf. Briant, 1996, pp. 330, 984). The Persian courier system, which the Persians called *angaréion* (8.98), is described in 8.98. (See also 3.126.2, where the courier is denoted *angaréios*. For the Persian road system, cf. Müller, 1987, 1997; Graf, 1994.)

Besides these minor “Persian Logoi” the Histories as a whole form a kind of major Persian Logos structured according to the Persian kings and certain



important magnates.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

See HERODOTUS xi. SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY.