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HERODOTUS IV. CYRUS ACCORDING TO HERODOTUS

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Time before kingship. The historical past takes on clearer outline beginning with the figure of Cyrus the Great. With him the Persians too are introduced into world history. Like the Mede Deioces, Cyrus appears as the founding king, "with whom their history really commences" (Bichler, 2000b, p. 256). At least two traditions are discernible, which conflict with one another. In Herodotus, knowledge of Cyrus's genealogy comes through only marginally, when his father Cambyses and his grandfather Cyrus [the First] are mentioned (1.111.5). Cyrus's connection with the house of the Achaemenids, as suggested in the propaganda conceived by Darius I, is hardly recognizable in the Histories (Rollinger, 1998 [1999], pp. 189-99). While this information of Herodotus provides Cyrus's lineage more historical depth and also the solidity of a royal pedigree, the appearance of Cyrus in the Histories is essentially based on another tradition. This is connected with the broadly sketched childhood story of Cyrus (see generally Van der Veen, 1996, pp. 23-52), which not only shows striking similarities with the old Oriental storytelling tradition (Lewis, 1980; Binder, 1964) but is also based on the concept of a new king destined by divine Providence to step out of the mists of history without showing a royal genealogy. This element is clearly brought out in Herodotus's report, which

particularly emphasizes the comparably low rank of Cambyses, Cyrus's father (1.107.2).

The decisive event of Cyrus's presentation is surrounded in the childhood story with legendary occurrences (concerning Herodotus's sources on this subject, cf. Accame, 1982; Sancisi-Weerdenburg, 1994; Rollinger, 2000b, pp. 100 f.). There are three stages leading Cyrus on the way to the throne. To begin with, two dreams of the Median king Astyages point to future events and to Cyrus's reign over Asia (1.107.1, 108.1). Both dreams are essential for Herodotus's historical picture. While the first dream brings about the marriage of Astyages' daughter Mandana with the Persian Cambyses, a fairly insignificant protagonist, the second dream leads to the decision to kill the child of this marriage (Bichler, 1985b; see also Pelling, 1996). Through Cyrus's birth Persians and Medes became dynastically related. This was already anticipated by the oracle presented to Croesus, telling him to watch out when a mule (*hēmíonos)* first ascended the throne of the Medes (1.55.2, 91.5-6), a construct which is probably due to Herodotus's creative power (Erbse, 1992). The task of eliminating the child Cyrus was given to the Mede Harpagus, but he did not carry it out and initiated a grave complication in the following events by handing over the little boy to the cowherd Mithradates with the instruction to abandon him in the wilderness (1.109 f.). His wife Kyno, whose name Herodotus equates with the Median word *spaka*—a key point for the conclusion that Median was a distinct language (Schmitt, 2003)—had just had a miscarriage; and she persuaded her husband to raise the child (Burkert, 1972, p. 125; Fehling, 1989, pp. 110 f.). Thus the plan of the tyrant Astyages was doomed to failure, and Cyrus grew up well cared for.

The second stage in the future king's ascent was young Cyrus's role in a game with his companions, who elected him as their king. The young lad proved himself as a sovereign, not only by organizing a royal household with various tasks, but also by treating disobedience with severe punishments, one of the victims of which was the son of the Mede Artembares (1.114). Through his father's complaint, the matter came to the ears of Astyages, who had the young king led to him and recognized him as his grandson, whom he had presumed to be dead. This led to the punishment of Harpagus, whose son was served to him at a feast (in the manner of Atreus's punishment of his brother in Greek tradition). It also led to a fatal mistake of the Magi (1.117-19), who considered the danger as averted, Cyrus having been elected as king in a childish game and the oracle having been realized (1.120).

The final stage shows Cyrus's bid for the throne with the energetic help of Harpagus, who was seeking vengeance. Cyrus offered the Persians freedom from the Median yoke (1.126.5), as well as certainty of guidance by divine Tyche (1.126.6). Finally, Astyages was defeated by his grandson, and as a result the Persians rose to become the rulers of the empire of the Medes (1.128 f.). The sovereignty of the Medes over Asia is described by Herodotus in imperial dimensions. Only a few passages show that there are also other political entities to account for. Herodotus indeed only mentions one specific border of this "Imperium," one which at the same time divided upper from lower Asia—the Halys River (Rollinger, 2003). With his victory over Astyages, Cyrus had risen to be the ruler of this empire and hence also the lord over upper Asia. But this was merely the beginning of a mighty phase of expansion, which brought this king to the fore as the first person to rule over all Asia (Wiesehöfer, 1987). These conquests are described by Herodotus in three separate sections.

Conquest of lower Asia. Expansion began with the victory over Croesus of Lydia, by which lower Asia came into the possession of the Persians and the latter also came into contact with the Greek cities in west and south Asia Minor. Herodotus presents Cyrus's westward advance in two separate "chapters": the clash with Croesus and the conflict with the Greeks.

With the news of Cyrus's victory over Astyages (1.46.1) and Croesus's decision to fight against the growing power of the Persians (1.46.2-49), Cyrus became the subject of the Lydian Logos (cf. Lombardo, 1990; Burkert, 1995; Bichler, 2000b, pp. 213-61). With the two oracles pronounced at Delphi and Amphiaraus, prophesying that Croesus would destroy a great empire if he fought against Cyrus (1.53), the clever reader—though not the blind Lydian king—was shown what was bound to happen (cf. Lanfranchi, 2000; Rollinger, 2003). With the oracle pronounced at Delphi that Croesus's reign was to end as soon as a mule would ascend the throne of the Medes (1.55.2), the Lydian Logos and the Cyrus story become closely connected with one another (Bichler, 1988b). By crossing the Halys River and disregarding Sandanis' warning speech, Croesus went to his doom (Bichler, 2000b, pp. 250 f.). In Cappadocia a battle fought between Croesus and Cyrus ended inconclusively (1.76.4), but Croesus's decision to retreat and to dismiss his mercenaries (1.77.4) proved to be a fatal misjudgement. The Persians advanced as far as Sardis, where the matter came to a decision. Despite a courageous defence by the Lydians, the Persians managed to triumph due to a ruse by Harpagus

(1.80.4). After fourteen days of siege, the Lydian metropolis fell (1.84). Croesus fell into the hands of the Persian king, who proposed to commit him to death by burning, together with 14 Lydian lads. This idea of Cyrus's to burn innocent boys and to test the gods (1.86.2) was not only to be considered as a heinous deed, but the intention to do so also blatantly went against the holiness of fire in the Persian sacrificial rites, which Herodotus was to mention later (1.131 f.). Cyrus was to recognize his sinful behavior, but the Persians were no longer in a position to extinguish the pyre (1.86.4-6). A divine rain was needed to preserve Croesus from certain death by burning and to have Cyrus realize that he was facing a man loved by the god (1.87.1-2; Burkett, 1985; Crane, 1996; Bichler, 2000b, pp. 252 f.). Croesus not only was set free and treated as an honored guest (1.88.1), but from then on also acted as a wise counsellor for Cyrus (for this Herodotean type, cf. Lattimore, 1939).

While Herodotus first provides a full account of Cyrus's conquest of the Lydian empire, he later again comes to describe this theater of war at great length, when the Lydians rose against the Persians and the Greek cities of western Asia Minor joined this rebellion (1.152-70). The two combined sections describe Cyrus's meeting with the Spartan envoy Lacrines in Sardis, who warns the Persian king against destroying a city on Greek soil (1.152.2-3). Cyrus's reply that he feared no people who cheated one another on the Agora (1.153.1) not only was a fundamental denial of the fighting spirit of the Greeks, but also formed a prelude to future arguments between Greeks and Persians (Bichler, 2000b, p. 264). Cyrus thereafter disappears from the events of war. The subjugation of the Greeks of Asia Minor was the concern of the Persian commanders Mazares and Harpagus (1.161-70; cf. Walser, 1984, pp. 12-16). The focus of Herodotus's reflection was, on the one hand, the complaint about the lack of agreement among the Greeks (1.170.1). On the other hand, Herodotus intimates that those Greeks who were conquered accompanied Harpagus on his further campaigns (1.171.1). The incorporation of the conquered nations within the contingent of the Persian army was later to become a current pattern in the gradual expansion of the Persian Empire (Bichler, 2000b, p. 265).

Babylon and the Massagetae. Immediately following his discussion with Lacrines, Cyrus revealed his future plans of conquest, which included Babylon and Egypt, as well as the territories of the Bactrians and Sakas (1.153.4). This comprised the entire continental complex facing Europe, with the exception of Libya and the land of the Ethiopians (Bichler, 2000b, p. 266). Herodotus further describes the conquest of upper Asia, expressly pointing out that he was

merely mentioning particularly important events (1.177). Meanwhile, he described the campaigns against Babylon (1.178-200; Rollinger, 1993, pp. 19-66) and against the Massagetae (1.201-16; Sieberer, 1995, pp. 214 ff.). Whether these two campaigns already anticipate Cambyses' campaigns against Egypt and Darius's against the Scythians (Redfield, 1985, p. 112) is an open question. In any case, the campaign against Babylon and the one against the Massagetae not only coincide in their structure, but also are antithetical, due to the contrasting outcome of the venture. The statement of the subject (1.177f // 1.201) is followed by an introduction to the region involved (1.178-83 // 1.201-4), which leads to an account of the actual campaign (1.188-91 // 1.205-14). The conclusion is a digression about some customs and practices of the region (1.192-200 // 1.215-16). The antithetical aspect of the construction is revealed, not only in the different outcomes of the two campaigns, but also in their details. Both opponents share a similar system of governing with weak sons (Labynetus // Spargapises) and powerful queen mothers (Nitocris // Tomyris). While, in the case of Babylon, Nitocris was no longer alive and Cyrus took advantage of her irrigation works for his strategy, Tomyris proved to be an invincible opponent. Although the ruse of diverting the river against Babylon led to the desired result, the one against the Massagetae marked the beginning of Cyrus's end. While Cyrus was defeated in what Herodotus (1.214) called the hardest battle ever fought among Barbarians, the capture of Babylon succeeded without a swordstroke.

Both campaigns were characterized by divine signs, which display Cyrus as a king who starts to take on increasingly an aspect of overweening pride (*hybris*). The signs are not just associated with Lacrines' misunderstood warning, but each time point to a fateful overstepping of divinely ordained limits. They start with the punishment of the Gyndes River ordered by Cyrus, after one of his white horses had drowned there (1.189). This was an offense against the Persians' own customs, since according to Herodotus rivers were considered holy by them (1.138.2). The royal prerogative of drinking the water of the Choaspes River (1.188) also suggests respect in dealing with this element (cf. Briant, 1995). Even the diversion of the river during the conquest of Babylon may be viewed in a context of sacrilege (Rollinger, 1993; see also Briquel, 1981). The reader, in any case, cannot help comparing this episode with Xerxes' rage against the Hellespont (8.35). Even if the control of the rivers within Asia was possible, the Araxes, which forms the border between Europe and Asia (Sieberer, 1995, pp. 26 ff.), led to a turning point in the fortune of the Persian king. Since the Massagetae lived beyond this river (1.201), Cyrus

crossed a similar divine boundary with his plans of conquest, just as his successors Darius and Xerxes were to do in the west (cf. Lateiner, 1985). Herodotus's remark that Cyrus had sailed across the Araxes on ships (1.205.2) also points to a venture combining land and maritime forces, like those we later encounter in the unsuccessful campaigns of Darius against the Scythians and of Xerxes against the Greeks (Bichler, 2000b, p. 267). Even the voice of the (futile) warner, which is so characteristic of Herodotus's works, is not missing in this connection (Bischoff, 1932, pp. 43 ff.; Lattimore, 1939). Like all powerful men facing a boundless enterprise, Cyrus also had the chance to reflect and change his mind; but his hybris did not let him recognize the situation, so that the warning of the messenger of Tomyris to content himself with what he had (1.206.1) remained unheard. In this context, Croesus's advice to carry the battle beyond the Araxes and to resort to an infamous ruse against the Massagetae proved that he was a fatal advisor (Erbse, 1992). Even a further and final warning against crossing the river left Cyrus unmoved. In a dream, he saw Darius wearing wings which cast a shadow over Asia and Europe (1.209.1). In this way the god not only pointed to the future successor and to the fact that he would be the man to carry Persian supremacy to Europe (Bichler, 1985b, pp. 128 f.), but also to the imminent death of Cyrus. However, the Great King misunderstood the dream and, fearing a revolt by Darius, sent his father Hystaspes to Susa to arrest Darius (1.209.2-5). Thus not only was the future usurper Darius kept alive (Bichler 2000b, p. 266), but the ensuing tribute paid to Cyrus by Hystaspes for having changed the Persians from remaining servants to becoming free men (1.210.2) can be interpreted as an anticipated obituary. Cyrus also ignored the last warning of Tomyris (1.212) that his fate would end in a fearful tragedy. Following a lost battle, his severed head was put into a bag full of blood, that being, according to Herodotus, the most credible variant among several stories about the death of the king (1.214).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

See HERODOTUS xi. SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY.