



HERODOTUS IX. TIGRANES AND THE BATTLE OF MYCALE

HERODOTUS

ix. TIGRANES AND THE BATTLE OF MYCALE

The fleets after Salamis. After Salamis, the escaped Persian fleet for a while ceased playing any further part. During the winter it was anchored in part at Cyme, and in part before Samos. The crew now appeared to consist mainly of Persians and Medes (8.130.1). The supreme command was divided between Mardontes, son of Bagaesus, Artayntes, son of Artachaees, and the latter's nephew, Ithamitres (8.130.2; cf. Bichler, 2000b, p. 348, n. 110). In the spring the fleet took up a position near Samos, so as to prevent the Ionians from breaking away. Herodotus calculates the force, including the Ionian contingents, as amounting to 300 ships (8.130.2). For the opposite side, he estimated 110 ships, which were under the command of the Spartan king Leutyichides. The Athenian contingent was led by Xanthippus (8.131.2-3). The Persians expected no advance by the enemy and hoped for a decision on land (8.130.3-4), and in fact Herodotus now paints a sad picture of the Greek fleet. Upon the request of anti-tyrants from Chios to support them and to free the Ionians, the Greeks reacted timidly. They only dared to advance as far Delos (8.132). Thus Herodotus at first provides a grotesque scene. The Persians did not dare advance beyond Samos; the Greeks were hesitating near Delos. Leutyichides did not agree to aid the delegates from Samos unless the latter promised that



the Ionians would break away (9.90-92.1). After the usual sacrifices, the fleet sailed to Samos, where the ships took up battle positions near Heraeum (9.96.1). The Persians risked no further encounter; they dismissed the Phoenician fleet and sailed with the rest to the mainland, where they sought the protection of the army (9.96.1-2). The latter was led by the Achaemenid Tigranes, who had 60,000 men at his disposal (9.96.2).

Mycale. The Persians beached their ships along the slopes of Cape Mycale and made them a fortification (9.96.3). Nearby, as at Plataeae, there was a sanctuary of the Eleusinian Demeter (9.101.1). The Greeks pursued and positioned themselves on land for battle (9.99.1). Leutychides had a herald challenge the Ionians to think about their freedom (9.98). The Persians disarmed the Samians, who had bought the freedom of the 500 Athenian prisoners taken at Salamis (9.99.1-2). The Milesians were detailed to watch the nearby passes (9.99.3). Before the battle, the Greeks were shown a good omen; a herald's staff was washed up ashore, and the rumor of Mardonius's defeat was spread (9.100.1). The battle took place on the same day as the one at Plataeae (9.90.1; 100.2; 101.2). This synchronism is considered by Herodotus as the expression of divine sympathy (9.100.2). What was at stake at Mycale is clearly established: the islands and the Hellespont (9.101.3). Herodotus describes the battle as a fight for the camp of ships. The Athenians started the attack, and the Lacedaemonians on the right wing fell behind because of the steep ground (9.102.1). The Persians defended themselves bravely and stood firm for a while, but then gave way; and the Greeks broke into the camp. Except for the Persians, all the Barbarians fled (9.102.2-3). When the Lacedaemonians appeared, the disaster became complete (9.103.1). The Ionians had already deserted when the battle began (9.103.2). Thus the warning words of Artabanus had turned out to be true (7.51): the Ionians broke away from the Persians for a second time. The Persians suffered bitter losses. Tigranes and Mardontes were killed (9.102.4). Only a few Barbarians escaped to Sardis (9.107.1). The Greeks burnt the ships, carrying off rich treasures (9.106.1), and sailed to Samos, where further action was discussed. The Persians had lost their maritime power in the Aegean.

Xerxes' character. Herodotus seized this opportunity to once more draw attention to the personality of the Great King. He thus rounded out a character study which was to create a lasting image of the Achaemenid's personality and his reign (cf. Sancisi-Weerdenburg, 1989 on this after-effect). There emerges a personality profile showing an immature king without sufficient



determination, who possesses remarkable physical qualities and many good features but in the end falls prey to despotic whims (Bichler 2000b, p. 357). Already in his first appearances, Herodotus introduces a wanton and cruel dictator (1.183.3, 4.43). Although Xerxes was also able to be generous and lenient (7.136.2), the debacle of his army made him suffer a moral disaster. Herodotus cleverly and with great technical skill combines the events around Mycale with his definitive character study of the Great King. During the survivors' flight to Sardis, the admiral Artayntes was harshly rebuked by the king's brother, Masistes, who called him more cowardly than a woman. This insult is said to amount to the worst disgrace among the Persians (9.107.1). When Artayntes drew his sword to kill Masistes, Xenagoras quickwittedly intervened and saved the life of the king's brother. As a sign of gratitude, Xerxes, who was still living in Sardis, appointed Xenagoras as governor of Cilicia (9.107.2-3).

The king's court. From the subject of Masistes, Herodotus now turns his attention to the king and tells the story of Xerxes' fatal passion for the wife of his brother and her daughter Artaynte (9.108-13; cf. Wolff, 1964; Briant, 1985; Sancisi-Weerdenburg, 1988). Herodotus thus presents two female prototypes at the Persian court, the first one being nameless, the other bearing the distinguished name of Artaynte (cf. Bichler, 2000b, p. 358 with n. 138). According to Aly (1921, p. 201), the story was the "most popular piece of Ionic novel-writing." Xerxes found himself in a difficult situation, since he had promised his beloved Artaynte to grant any wish, which was—the king's splendid garment received from Amestris. In vain he offered alternatives of rulership over cities and army command (9.109.3), a scenario which freely disregards basic sexual roles. Here Xerxes himself behaves like a woman, since he is ultimately at the command of his revengeful wife Amestris. We may remember his cutting reproach to Artabanus about sitting at home like a woman.

Amestris was lenient towards Artaynte, but she vented her wrath at the totally innocent mother, the wife of Masistes. She waited for the annual banquet organized on the king's birthday, a day on which none of her wishes could be rejected. (Cf. Bichler, 2000b, p. 359, who assumes that Herodotus may have invented this festive tradition. Sancisi-Weerdenburg, 1989b, pp. 132-33, disagrees.) The queen demanded that Masistes' wife be handed over to her. (9.110-11). Xerxes reluctantly fulfilled her wish and is thus for the second time presented as a plaything in the hands of a woman. At the same time, he



wanted to force his brother Masistes to repudiate his wife and to marry his niece, a daughter of Xerxes, instead. Masistes indignantly refused. (9.111).

Meanwhile Amestris' horrible and equally senseless revenge was directed against Masistes' wife. She ordered her breasts, ears, nose, lips, and tongue to be cut off (9.112). Herodotus describes Amestris as a reigning fury, strikingly reminiscent of Pheretime taking revenge on the people of Barca (4.202; cf. Bichler, 2000b, p. 359 with n. 140). She represented the female counterpart of the Oriental despot, unfolding her deeds in barbaric brutality. When Masistes found out about the mutilation, he wanted to leave for Bactria to organize a rebellion there. According to Herodotus, he would have succeeded, but Xerxes forestalled him and had him and his sons—his own closest relatives—killed (9.113). Artaynte has thus brought the worst disaster upon her own family. She and her husband Darius, Xerxes' son, survived this gruesome story.

Xerxes and his successors. Herodotus provided no information about Xerxes' death and merely alluded to the moral destruction of the king. At the same time, he was aware that Xerxes' debacle had by no means upset his reign in Asia. After the defeat at Salamis, Artemisia stated that it made little difference whether Mardonius was victorious or whether he died in Hellas. For the crucial thing was that Xerxes should preserve his reign in Asia (8.102). Apart from that there is no forecasting of the future, which in any case was known to Herodotus's contemporaries. The Persian Empire preserved its stability, apart from the fact of losing the Aegean; and Xerxes remained on the Persian throne long after the defeat. Herodotus refers to Xerxes' successor Artaxerxes several times. Events in the latter's reign included the revolt in Egypt (3.12.4; 7.7) and the dispatch of an Argive and Athenian delegation to Susa (7.151-52; on the problem of the "peace of Callias," ca. 449-448 B.C.E., see Bichler, 2000b, p. 370 with n. 175; see generally Hofstetter 1972, 1978).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

See HERODOTUS xi. SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY.