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HERODOTUS V. CAMBYSES ACCORDING TO HERODOTUS

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Genealogy. Cambyses, the son of Cyrus, is first described by Herodotus at a time when his father's reign was already about to end. (For Herodotus's portayal of this king, cf. Hofmann and Vorbichler, 1980; Brown, 1982; Lloyd, 1988; Obsomer, 1998; Cruz-Uribe, 2003.) While he was preparing to cross the Araxes to seek a decision against Tomyris, his father sent him together with Croesus back to Persia from the army camp where he was staying (1.208). According to Herodotus, the change of rulers took place without causing problems. Cambyses is simply introduced as the son of Cassandane, daughter of Pharnaspes (2.1). Herodotus returns to the subject of the king's origin immediately after ending the Egyptian Logos. Here he not only repeats the subject of Cambyses' noble descent, this time expressly describing Pharnaspes as an Achaemenid (3.2.2), but he also offers an alternative allegedly referred to by Egyptian informers, according to which Cambyses was the son of Nitetis, a daughter of Apries, and hence an Egyptian (3.2.1). Herodotus expressly rejects this version, but there is at least a genealogical connection associated with it which may be considered as a running theme in Herodotus's history: namely the "kinship" through marriage of all the ruling classes of Asia, in which the Egyptians are also included—at least according to an apparently oral tradition

(Bichler, 2000b, pp. 269 f.). Herodotus also mentions another “childhood story” for Cambyses, which he equally qualifies as dubious. The young lad was said to have sworn that he would one day bring disaster over Egypt, because his mother Cassandane had been ranked lower than the Egyptian Nitetis. Cambyses was ten years old at the time (3.3). The well-informed reader may remember that the young Cyrus had reached the same age when he started his portentous royal game (1.114-15).

Egypt. As his first great feat, the campaign against Egypt is mentioned (3.3.3), which Herodotus assumed to have taken place at the beginning of his reign (about the date, cf. Bichler, 2000b, pp. 180 f., n. 141). This campaign is described as a colossal enterprise, both on land and at sea. Even if it was decided in a great battle on land near Pelusium (3.11.3), the presence of the fleet was just as evident (3.13.1-2). The already defeated Ionians and Aeolians were also involved (2.1.2, 3.1.1), as were the Phoenicians and Cypriots (3.19.3).

World dominion. After the conquest of Egypt, the Libyans as well as the Greeks of Cyrene and Barca also paid voluntary tribute (3.13.3-4). This led to the emergence of the greatest empire yet in history, but the king was not content with these achievements. Indeed he had boundless plans for the extension of his empire, thus not only sowing the seeds for later disaster, but already anticipating his mad deeds. Here, too, as in the entire historical work of Herodotus, the elements played an important part. They not only referred to the Great King’s hybris, but to an experience from the time of Xerxes’ attack on Greece, from which Herodotus draws his historical-philosophical modules to form world history. Thus Cambyses, too, wanted to endlessly expand his empire on sea and on land and conquer the country facing Europe, exactly foreshadowing Xerxes’ future imperialist plans. Three campaigns were planned (3.17 and 25.1-2). The fleet was to sail against the Carthaginians; a section of the army was sent against the pious Ammonians; and the main part of the army was to march against the long-lived Ethiopians in the deep south. The attack against Carthage could not be started, because the Phoenician fleet refused to proceed against its own colony (3.19.2). This episode certainly acquired its historical substance merely through its comparison with the events of the Xerxes campaign and the Greek maritime contingents in the Persian army, from which it drew a sarcastically didactic undertone. The campaign against the oracle center of the Ammonians, which was set on fire and whose inhabitants were to be enslaved (3.25.3), calls to mind the future misdeeds against Greek shrines. And here, too, divine punishment followed.

The Persian contingent of 50,000 men (3.25.3) fell victim to a powerful south wind. This may also call to mind the element of the divine storms, which—even before the first naval battle against the Greeks near Cape Artemisium—was to reduce the Persian fleet by half.

The third of Cambyses' enterprises also ended in a debacle, a venture to the end of the world being considered as a sin by Herodotus (3.25.1). Here, too, parallels may be drawn with later campaigns by the Great Kings, who were distinguished by their grand failures. As in the case of Darius's campaign against the Scythians (4.97-98), the Greeks fell behind in this venture (3.25.2). The army was worn down by the length of the journey and by hunger and exhaustion (cf. the lack of provisions and the starvation suffered by Xerxes' army, 8.115). The slow and gradual decline led through raging starvation, the slaughtering of draft animals, the eating of roots and herbs, and down to cannibalism. Every tenth soldier was picked by drawing lots and devoured by his comrades. Only then did Cambyses give up his plans and end the campaign (3.25). Herodotus's philosophy of history here evolves from historical comparison, for the differences with Darius's later campaign against the Scythians are obvious. Cambyses had started a fight in a blind fury and without proper preparations (3.25.1). On top of that, he was unable to stop it at the right time. He thus missed the opportunity of acting reasonably and of recognizing his own mistakes (3.25.5). This already showed a tendency towards the frenzy and violent rage which marked the Great King's later behavior in the Histories.

Madness. The Ethiopian campaign can therefore count as a decisive turning-point in Herodotus's description of Cambyses. Added to it was a further element which may be considered as characteristic for Herodotus's description: an arrogant attitude was preceded by urgent warnings, which were just as consistently ignored. The meeting of the Persian ambassador with the king of Ethiopia may serve as a key example (cf. Bischoff, 1932, p. 46). The latter immediately saw through Cambyses' imperialistic intentions (3.21.2) and unmasked his royal gifts as marks of a deceitful civilization (3.22). The Ethiopian present in return (one full of meaning, in good Herodotean fashion) was a sign to the Persian royal house. Not until Cambyses was able to draw the bow was he to dare once more to march against Ethiopia (3.21.3). Only Cambyses' brother Smerdis would be in a position to draw the bow a little (3.30.1). With this event, Herodotus introduces the beginning of the Great King's insane actions, which culminated in rages against his own siblings and

finally led to the end of Cambyses and his dynasty. It must be remembered, however, that Herodotus at first described Cambyses as a divided personality and by no means denied his having noble characteristics. For instance, young Cambyses staunchly defended the honor of his mother (3.3). After the victory over Egypt and the degrading punishment of Psammenitus, the king did have feelings of pity and insight (3.14.11). Although he was not able to rescue the son of the Egyptian king from death, he did ask the defeated king to join him. Herodotus especially points out that Cambyses would have entrusted him with the governorship over Egypt if he had not decided to rebel (3.15.1-2). The gentle treatment of Amasis' widow also belongs to this context (2.181.5). An initial change in the description of the Great King's character was the descecration of King Amasis' body (3.16). Thereafter Cambyses became more and more of a despot, a character image which was thoroughly revealed by the overweening venture of waging war against Ethiopia (3.17-26). The height of this development is marked by a series of episodes exclusively dealing with the Great King's madness and crimes (3.27-38; cf. Munson, 1991). It all began with the heinous deed against the Apis bull and his worshippers (3.27-29). Cambyses was blind enough to consider the religious ceremonies as a celebration of the failure of the Ethiopian campaign. He had the governors of Memphis executed (3.27.3), the priests whipped, and the celebrating citizens killed. He personally stabbed the Apis bull (3.29). (On the Egyptian sources, whose interpretation remains controversial, cf. Bichler, 2000b, p. 273, n. 26; Cruz-Uribe, 2003).

Smerdisδ assassination. The Egyptians considered the king's madness as divine punishment and associated it with his sacrilegious deed (3.30.1), but Herodotus believed that Cambyses had been born with this sickness (3.33). He mentions as the first of his blatantly insane actions the behavior against his brother Smerdis (3.30.1). Here Herodotus makes Cambyses indirectly responsible for a situation which eventually was to raise Darius to the throne. Events began, as is often the case, with a vision. The Great King sees a messenger, who tells him that Smerdis is seated on the throne with his head touching the sky (3.30.2). The tightness and unity of Herodotus's description is shown in the fact that Cambyses receives the vision from a messenger. This point is essential for reasons of composition, for the deceptive dream indeed shows the false Smerdis on the throne, whom Cambyses would have immediately recognized as such (Köhnken, 1980). Cambyses consequently becomes the crucial accomplice to realization of the vision and the tragic facilitator of his own doom. Already he had sent his brother to Persia out of

jealousy (3.30.1). Cambyses now considers his brother as a possible usurper and sends out his trusted friend Prexaspes to murder Smerdis (cf. Lang, 1992; see now also Vallat, 1999). Herodotus provides two alternative accounts of the method of the assassination, having Smerdis either killed during the hunt or drowned in the Red Sea (3.30.3). As for the murder of his younger sister/wife (3.31.6), which immediately followed, Herodotus offers two variants (3.32). The occasion is significant; she had apparently mourned the death of Smerdis or reproached Cambyses for having emptied his own home by killing his brother. In the Greek version, Cambyses orders his sister to be executed (3.32.3); in the Egyptian one he kicks the pregnant woman, who then has a miscarriage and dies (3.32.4). Immediately before that, Herodotus had expanded the theme of marriage between brother and sister into a little treatise examining the relationship between royal power and traditional law (3.31). By marrying two sisters, Cambyses went against Persian tradition and enforced the legitimation of this breach of the law through the royal judges. This reveals a specific feature of boundless despotism, which is constantly pointed out by Herodotus in the course of his exposition (Bichler, 2000b, p. 274).

Rage and atrocities. A further series of atrocities was committed against his immediate circle (3.34-36). Cambyses asked Prexaspes to tell him what the Persians thought about the Great King. Prexaspes answered truthfully, mentioning the depraved alcoholism which the subjects associated with their king. Cambyses became so angry that he killed the son of Prexaspes, whom he shot right through the heart, thus proving his apparently steady hand. Herodotus here points out the grovelling attitude of the court by having Prexaspes flatter the king for shooting better than a deity (3.35.4). To the reader of the Histories, the murder of the son might be a just punishment for the assassination of Smerdis. This, however, did not put an end to Cambyses' rage. He had twelve Persian noblemen buried headfirst without any reason (3.35.5). Cambyses also threatened to kill Croesus, when the latter tried to reason with him (3.36; cf. West, 2003). Attentive servants managed to rescue him, but they paid for this deed with their lives (3.36.6). These mad deeds eventually ended in religious crimes (3.37). Burial chambers were opened, forbidden sanctuaries were entered, and religious symbols were burnt. Herodotus ends this subject with a meditation on the diversity of human morals, which only a madman is in a position not to respect. Unlike Cambyses, Darius will recognize this (3.38).

Cambyses and Greek tyrants. With that, Herodotus made a deep break in his

work, directing his attention to Samos and the fate of Polycrates. This section also includes a reflection regarding Corinth and its tyrant Periander (3.39-60). (Cf., on the interconnection of Cambyses' and Polycrates' stories, Immerwahr, 1966, pp. 98 f.; Cobet, 1971, pp. 159 ff.) In this context, there is evident a compositional linkage between Greek and Persian history which may be considered as basic for Herodotus's history and which moves the Greek tyrants close to the Oriental despots (cf. Waters, 1971; Gray, 1996). This structural association gains concentration from the fact that Herodotus does not continue his "Samic Digression" to the end of the Polycrates story. Instead there is the "postscript" regarding the end of Cambyses (3.61-66). After a delay, there then follows the story of the end of Polycrates through an intrigue by Oroites (3.126 f.), whereby this episode is again embedded in an account about the satrap in Magnesia on the Meander (3.120-28), thus leading to a further complication of the entire story.

The end. The chronological structure of the Histories shows that Herodotus did not consider the end of Cambyses as being long before that of Polycrates (3.120.1; 3.126-27.1). Along with the compositional associations between the events around Cambyses and Polycrates, in which visions and their disregard point the way to doom (cf. 3.124 f., the dream of Polycrates' daughter, announcing the end of the dynasty), there are also clear references to the demise of the Lacedaemonian king Cleomenes, which involves a fatal interconnection of oracles, madness, and self-injury (6.75-84). Here the reproach of alcoholism comes up, together with the ambiguity in the name of the fated place of death predicted by the oracle (cf. Griffiths, 1989). In this context, the account of the end of the despot Cambyses may indeed have been shaped through a tradition disparaging Cleomenes (Bichler 2000b, p. 276). However, we must remember that Cambyses died a royal death, unlike the ignominious execution of Polycrates (3.125) and the lamentable suicide of Cleomenes (6.75). While in Agbatana, in Syria he found out about the rebellion of the false Smerdis and his brother Patizeithes. He jumped on his horse and wounded himself with his sword at the very place where he had once fatally wounded the Apis bull (3.64). With certain death before him, he suddenly came to his senses. He then recognized the fulfillment of the dream about Smerdis and the royal throne, as well as the deceptive truth of the oracle of Buto, which had once prophecied his death in "Agbatana" (3.64.4-5). He also regretted his misdeeds and advised the Persians about their future course (3.65): they should prevent the return of the Medes and preserve the freedom of the Persians (3.65.7).

The Persians at first would not believe him and doubted the seizure of power by the Magi, whereby the death of Cambyses acquired a tragic note (3.66.3-67.1). Nevertheless the insight of the Great King was of dramatic importance for the Histories of Herodotus, for this led to the story of the false Smerdis and his downfall. After the death of Cambyses (cf. Walser, 1983; Balcer, 1987, pp. 95 ff.) Herodotus matter-of-factly described his reign as lasting seven years and five months (3.66.2). This should not obscure the fact that he used the reign of the Persian king to introduce the paradigm of a despot, which at the same time was to be interpreted as a concave mirror reflecting Greek tyranny (cf. Hartog, 1988, pp. 332 f.; Gammie, 1986; on the other hand Waters, 1971). This is shown in a last anecdote told by Herodotus in his fifth book. Cambyses' punishment of the corrupt judge Sisamnes, whom he skinned and with whose skin he covered the judge's bench, on which the latter's son was to take his place as judge (5.25), splendidly fits into a character image which sees Cambyses as a *despótēs* (3.89.3). There may be fragments of Iranian mythology worked into this stylization (Hoffmann and Vorbichler, 1980); Greek elements are just as clearly recognizable (Balcer, 1987, p. 72; Köhnken, 1980)

BIBLIOGRAPHY

See HERODOTUS xi. SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY.