



# HERODOTUS X. ARTAYCTES AND THE FINALE

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*Sestus.* After the battle of Mycale, the Greeks advanced as far as the Hellespont, where they found that Xerxes' bridge was already destroyed (9.114.1). While Leutychides and the Peloponnesians now ended the fight and sailed home, the Athenians did not stop the offensive they had started (9.114.2). Until late autumn they laid siege to Sestus, the major Persian base on the straits (9.115). The commander Artayctes held the fortress to the point when hunger forced the defenders to give up (9.118.1). Artayctes is qualified as *toû nomou Xérxeō hýparchos* (9.116.1). The passage is crucial for the controversial discussion whether European Thrace was ever considered to be a Persian satrapy, i.e., Skudra (cf. Archibald, 1998, pp. 79-90). During the night, the Persians had themselves let down outside the city (9.118.1). Apart from Artayctes, Herodotus mentions the Persian Oeobazus, who had fled from Cardia to the allegedly secure fortress of Sestus (9.115). Both of them, however, were caught while trying to escape.

*Artayctes' execution.* While the Thracian Aspinthians were offering human sacrifices to their god Pleistorus (9.119), the Greeks had Artayctes and his son suffer a particularly cruel death. On Xanthippus's behest he was impaled at



the place where Xerxes' bridge had once been (9.120). (On the manner of execution, cf. Rollinger, 1998, pp. 347 f. with n. 31.) It is true that this harsh punishment was not directed at an innocent person. Artayctes had already appeared as a sinner before. He had sullied the sanctuary of the hero Protesilaus in Elaeus, plundered its treasures, used its precincts as a field for cultivation, and repeatedly had sexual intercourse within the holy shrine area (9.116). After his capture, a sign had revealed to him that he was to be punished by the hero. Artayctes tried to save his life and that of his son by promising to pay a fine; but the Elaeusians demanded his death, so that his fate was sealed. He was the last despotic individual in the Histories who had believed that he could rise above all limits but ended up falling all the more deeply. Yet, through the manner of punishment and their subsequent actions, the Greeks put themselves in the wrong. While the father's execution might count as punishment for his sins, the stoning of the son before the eyes of the impaled father had the Greeks follow in the footprints of Persian brutality (9.120.4).

*The roots of Persian power.* Curiously enough, Herodotus now devotes a magnificent end scene to the Persians, rather than to the victors, by turning his eyes back to the founder of the Persian Empire. This is done through a genealogical construct. An ancestor of the crucified Artayctes, called Artembares, was said to have presented a well-known proposal after the Persian victory over Astyages. The Persians were to give up their rough dwellings and travel to more fertile lands, which could easily be conquered (9.122.2). Here Herodotus again picks up a subject which runs throughout the Histories, from the time when Sandanis warned Croesus about what would happen when the Persians started tasting Lydian luxury: they would no longer leave that country (1.71.3). Cyrus rejected Artembares' project with the clever remark that this suggestion would cost the Persians their rulership, for soft countries produced soft men. A country could not bring forth both lavish fruits and men fit for active service (9.122). This leads to a deeper understanding of the Histories as a whole. Since Cyrus, the Persians had successively spread their rule over increasingly larger parts of the world, and yet they had not given up their own homes. It was due to this circumstance that the empire possessed a steady character; the roots of power had been preserved, as shown among other things in the fact that the Persian core units had always proved brave and spirited.

*Persians and despots.* However, unlike the Greeks, the Persians had to



subordinate their freedom to the great royal despot, and they mainly fought to possess distant countries, a situation which in itself boded disaster (Bichler, 2000b, p. 362; see also pp. 223-26, where Bichler demonstrates that Herodotus did not have a philosophy of historical decadence, a *Dekadenztheorie*, in mind, as Xenophon was to have later). This leads to the fatal tendency to want more and more power and to cross all borders, a tendency which rapidly led to the doom of the Persian kings. It would have been possible to learn from one's predecessors, but history shows that those who lust for power are devoid of the necessary insight.

Comparing the final chapter with the genesis of the Persian Empire as discussed in the Histories, we are aware of a certain tragic irony. However, this aspect of the work is controversial in modern scholarship. It is connected with the question as to whether the work is to be considered as finished and whether the conclusion obtained actually represents the ending intended by the author (Bichler, 2000b, p. 362, n. 152; Bichler and Rollinger, 2000, pp. 141-47, 150-52). In any case, Herodotus unmistakably considered war as evil (8.3.1). Darius, Xerxes, and Artaxerxes were said to have caused more harm to Greece than had happened in the twenty generations before Darius (6.98.2).

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

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See HERODOTUS xi. SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY.