

HERODOTUS' PERSPECTIVE ON THE PERSIAN EMPIRE¹

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Abstract: This paper reviews the different models commonly used in understanding Herodotus' evidence on the Achaemenid Persian empire. It suggests that these approaches—for example, the assessment of Herodotus' accuracy, of the level of his knowledge, or of his sympathy for the Persians—systematically underestimate the complexity of his (and of the Greeks') perspective on the Persian empire: the conflicted perspective of a participant rather than just a detached observer.

Keywords: Herodotus, Achaemenid, Persia, imperialism, Xerxes, Hellenocentrism.

When I was a teenage boy, on a soulful evening walk by the river Thames, I came upon a man—of South Asian background, smartly dressed, and worse for drink—shouting out across the water into the gusts of wind. “I love the Queen. I love Buckingham Palace. I love Oxford, I love Cambridge. I love Eton...,” and on he went through a litany of British institutions, until he began to recycle the individual items, and then eventually shuffled off. The image of this man has stayed with me. At the time, I associated him with my own grandfather, who left India for Britain in around 1920 to train to be a doctor: a man I never knew, but for whom—as his photographs of awkwardly smiling landladies testify—any welcome never hardened into belonging. I include this anecdote here, however, as an emblem of the psychological complexity of attitudes to the ‘Other,’ and—in due course—as a very imperfect analogy for Greek attitudes to Persia. Perhaps, just perhaps, I should have taken the man's call at face value, as a sign of his impassioned admiration for British institutions? (Did I project my own associations onto the scene inappropriately?) In my eyes, however, then as now, his protestations seemed desperate—as if they

¹ I am delighted to have this opportunity to share in celebrating the 100th anniversary of the foundation of the Department of Ancient History of the Jagiellonian University, and the twenty-fifth anniversary also of my own highly memorable first visit to Kraków and to the Jagiellonian University. I return here, with a wider lens, to the topic of my paper then, my first academic presentation outside Britain—a visit generously brokered by Michael Whitby. My thanks also to Uzume Wijnsma and Caroline Waerzeggers for the invitation that prompted me to write this paper, and to the audience at Leiden for their comments.

were answering a question-mark over his loyalty, or as if genuine belonging in the face of such institutions were unattainable.

As this opening anecdote—to which I will return—might suggest, my object in this paper is not so much to review Herodotus' evidence for the Persian empire (although a range of such evidence will be discussed) as to examine our approach to such evidence: the models—perhaps not all of them conscious—by which we instinctively operate. I will be suggesting, put simply, that such models would look absurdly simplistic if transferred to our own world. There is, of course, no single prevailing approach to Herodotus and Persia. How we approach the *Histories* will depend very much on our scholarly backgrounds, and the nature of the questions we are seeking to answer: whether, for example, our focus is on Persian court protocol or on the patterns of Herodotus' ethnographic thought. Nevertheless, it might fairly be said that discussion can be distilled down to a small number of key questions and approaches.

The first is, in effect, to grade Herodotus' performance. Does he get his facts wrong or right?² Herodotus renders the (male) Persian Mitra a female deity (1.131); he asserts confidently that all Persian names end in sigma (1.139), and he appears to suppose that the meaning of the names of the Persian kings Darius, Xerxes and Artaxerxes can be understood by moulding them into just recognisably Greek forms—supposing, for example, that Darius means 'warlike' (ἄρῆιος, 6.98).³ We may try to argue away some of Herodotus' mistakes—to draw a distinction between the spelling and the pronunciation of Persian names;⁴ or we may explore the likely explanation for those errors: that he has been misled by a verbal resemblance into supposing that Mitra is a mother-goddess,⁵ or that he shared contemporary ideas about the origins of language.⁶ To the extent that his facts are ultimately mistaken, however, there is a danger that such contextualisation sounds like special pleading to avoid a basic truth: Herodotus muddles things, he 'garbles' them.⁷

This approach can be broadened out to ask not so much about knowledge of the facts of Persian society but whether he really *understood* Persian society, or the Persian court. Even a Herodotean commentator, Michael Flower, concludes from Herodotus' insistence on the truth of the Constitutional Debate of Book 3 that it shows "how little Herodotus understood the mentalité of sixth-century Persia."⁸ The judgement from many Persian historians is more damning.⁹ In essence, he is condemned for not even trying to understand Persia. Herodotus, for Lindsay Allen, for example, 'is our most garrulous informant', "the Cecil B. de Mille of ancient history," and the author of "an elaborate dynastic

² Flower 2006, 274 ("How accurate is Herodotus' account of Persian history and culture? Are there Persian or other Greek sources that supplement, correct, or verify what Herodotus tells us?").

³ See here Chamberlain 1999, 267–272, 278; Munson 2005, 48–49.

⁴ See Chamberlain 1999, 289, note 59 for references.

⁵ Merkelbach 1984, 10, note 1.

⁶ See here, from different perspectives: Harrison 1998; Chamberlain 1999.

⁷ So, e.g., Flower 2006, 280: "Herodotus' brief survey of Persian customs and mores (1.131–140) constitutes a mixture of the idealised, the fairly accurate, and the somewhat misunderstood."

⁸ Flower 2006, 279.

⁹ I concur here with Munson's opening judgement, 2009, 457.

soap opera.”¹⁰ For Henry Colburn, reverting to an old cliché, Herodotus is “historian, ethnographer and *raconteur*.”¹¹ At a more detailed level, then, a sub-genre of articles sets out to show that an action that Herodotus describes in a moralising Greek perspective—Xerxes’ whipping of the Hellespont, or his marching of an army through the bisected body of the Lydian Pythius (7.35, 39.3) can instead be understood, when set in a longer-term Near-Eastern context, as the misunderstanding of long-established rituals.¹²

A third approach then to Herodotus’ engagement with Persia—one which might seem more promising in so far as it is more fundamental—is to seek to establish the degree of sympathy that he evinces for the Persians or their kings. Here opinions diverge clearly according to disciplinary perspective. On the one hand, at least for those concerned to counter the emphasis on the Greek construction of the Other, Herodotus is understood as remarkably sympathetic to the Persians generally, or to individual figures such as Xerxes.¹³ On the other hand, he is seen (together with other Greek sources) as representing one of the first files in the “archive of Orientalism.”¹⁴

All of these approaches imply—and serve to validate—consequent responses to Herodotus’ evidence for Persian history. If we choose to emphasize Herodotus’ errors, or if we deem that he failed at a fundamental level really to (try to) understand the Persian court and society, then this authorizes the historian to downgrade the value of his work in comparison with other evidence. (As long ago as 1846, for example, Henry Rawlinson damned Herodotus with faint praise as an “honest, but not very critical historian” whose evidence “must be received with considerable caution”).¹⁵ To draw the conclusion of a failure of understanding has the subtly different implication that we can still find kernels or ‘nuggets’ of evidence within the *Histories* that their author himself may not have appreciated.¹⁶ We can suppose, for example (with Pierre Briant), from Herodotus’ account of the false Smerdis—and in particular the trouble that Darius and his fellow-conspirators had in entering the palace—that protocols controlling access were likely to have been in place “at the time of the first kings.”¹⁷ To ascribe a failure of sympathy to Herodotus, then, lends a motive to the pattern of his mistakes and misunderstandings and allows us to redress the balance: if Herodotus’ account of Persia is washed through with a pejorative bias, then by bleaching his account we can get closer to the historical truth. The more that we judge that Herodotus’ picture of Persian society was a black-and-white

¹⁰ Allen 2005, 10–11, 56. Contrast Pelling’s emphasis, 2016, 69–70, on the *Histories* as refraining from exoticizing the Persians.

¹¹ Colburn 2019, 1 (the italics are mine).

¹² See e.g., Masson 1950; Keaveney 1996.

¹³ E.g., Gruen 2011, 21–39 (esp. 29, 31); cf. Isaac 2004, 302 (“the fifth-century authors who wrote about the wars with Persia did so in a spirit of respect for the Persians”).

¹⁴ So, e.g., by Colburn 2019, ch. 1. The expression is Edith Hall’s, of Aeschylus’ *Persians*: 1989, 99.

¹⁵ Rawlinson 1846, 187–188.

¹⁶ The task of the historian is to “distinguish the Greek interpretative coating from the Achaemenid nugget [in French, ‘noyau’, or kernel] of information”: Briant 2002, 256. Contrast West 2003, 437; Kuhrt 2003, 357. Munson, 2009, 457–458, in the context of a nuanced discussion of Herodotus’ Persians, at one moment observes: “Although Herodotus, needless to say, does not get everything right, he provides a great deal of authentic information.”

¹⁷ Briant 2002, 91.

inversion of Greek norms¹⁸—the more clearly we condemn his work as Orientalist or see it as informed by negative views of the Barbarian Other—the more decisive we can be, in turn, in flipping that image.¹⁹

Notwithstanding the profound achievements that have been generated on the basis of such approaches, and the important corrective that they represented in their time and context,²⁰ they also raise important questions. The inversion of ‘Hellenocentric’ accounts of Persia—as if Herodotus’ and other Greek accounts were photographic negatives—can lead, at times, to a riskily selective approach: one by which unpalatable aspects of the portrayal of Persia (royal women’s violence, for example) can be dismissed as mere Orientalist cliché, whilst other aspects can be used as the basis for reconstructing an alternative, more benign image.²¹ Perhaps most fundamentally, however, in approaching any historical source for the evidence that it provides for a discrete issue, a crucial principle is that one should first try to understand that source sympathetically, generously even, on its own terms, to attempt to discern those authorial priorities and ideological contexts that might impinge on the particular items of evidence that concern one. (If one’s starting point, on the other hand, in approaching a given literary author is explicit reluctance—or, still worse, to hold one’s nose—it is perhaps never going to go well.)²² My point here is one that J. R. R. Tolkien made very well in the form of an allegory in his ‘The monsters and the critics.’²³ (His immediate concern was the Old English poem *Beowulf*, but the wider relevance is clear enough.)

A man inherited a field in which was an accumulation of old stone, part of an older hall. Of the old stone some had already been used in building the house in which he actually lived, not far from the old house of his fathers. Of the rest he took some and built a tower. But his friends coming perceived at once (without troubling to climb the steps) that these stones had formerly belonged to a more ancient building. So they pushed the tower over, with no little labour, in order to look for hidden carvings and inscriptions, or to discover whence the man’s distant forefathers had obtained their building material. Some suspecting a deposit of coal under the soil began to dig for it, and forgot even the stones. They all said: ‘This tower is most interesting.’ But they also said (after pushing it over): ‘What a muddle it is in!’ And even the man’s own descendants, who might have been expected to consider what he had been about, were heard to murmur: ‘He is such an odd fellow! Imagine his using these old stones just to build a nonsensical tower! Why did not he restore the old

¹⁸ So, e.g., Kuhrt 1995, 648: “This is an inversion of Greek social and political norms, with which we, as Europeans have usually identified: the image of the cowardly, effeminate Persian monarch has exercised a strong influence through the centuries, making the Persian empire into a powerful ‘other’ in European Orientalism, contrasted with ‘western’ bravery and masculinity”.

¹⁹ So, e.g., the mission to “dehellenize and decolonialise” Persian history: Sancisi-Weerdenburg 1987, 131.

²⁰ Since Pierre Briant has questioned in print (Briant 2013; cf. Harrison 2011, 18) the sincerity of my appreciation of the scholarship of the last forty years, I put on record again that my admiration of the work of the *Achaemenid History Workshop* scholars is immense.

²¹ To extend the example of Persian royal women, Harrison 2011, 65: “To caricature the end point of the argument, Persian women were enterprising and full of initiative (unlike their Greek counterparts); but they were not cruel or nasty; or, if they were, it was with good reason (family loyalty), or was anyway approved by their male relatives.” Cf. the similar corrective of Flower 2006, 284.

²² So, e.g., Briant 2002, 8: “We have no choice but overwhelming reliance on Greek historiography to reconstruct a narrative thread.”

²³ Tolkien 1936, 248.

house? He had no sense of proportion.' But from the top of that tower the man had been able to look out upon the sea.

Herodotus' perspective cannot, of course, be reduced to a single 'view', but the wider moral pertains: that—just as a reading of a text like the famous Udjahorresnet inscription (so crucial for any account of early Achaemenid Egypt) needs to be predicated on an understanding of the very specific genre of which it was an example (and indeed the order in which the text should be read)²⁴—so any adequate reading of a single *logos* of the *Histories* needs to reflect a serious understanding of that *logos*' wider setting.²⁵ (Nineteenth-century writers may have seen Herodotus' *Histories* as the mere assemblage of disparate parts,²⁶ but such attitudes are long distant, in Herodotean scholarship at least.) One significant factor shaping material on Persia within the *Histories*, for example, is the counterpoint between Persian and Athenian imperialism that runs throughout his text, and (related to this) the parallelisms presented with the contemporary Atheno-Peloponnesian wars. (It has been suggested, for example, that the Persian Council Scene of Book 7 offers an oblique commentary on Athens' expedition to Sicily).²⁷ But beyond this, we need also to see the representation of Persia and the Persians within the wider framework of his whole model of historical development,²⁸ his concern for freedom,²⁹ or his conception of gender relations.³⁰ (Here I scarcely scratch the surface.)

At the same time, moreover, it is clear that Herodotus' account reflects much wider Greek discourses on Persia, and that it is frequently hard to distinguish an authorial perspective from the wider milieu in which Herodotus was embedded. His account of Persia is rich in stray anecdotes, for example the passing mention of Darius' favourite wife made in the context of his catalogue of the Persian forces in Book 7 (7.69): "the Arabians and the Ethiopians who dwell above Egypt had as commander Arsames, the son of Darius and Artystone daughter of Cyrus, whom Darius loved best of his wives; he had an image made of her of hammered gold." Such an anecdote can be put together with others in the *Histories* (that of Atossa approaching Darius in bed, 3.134, or the 'harem intrigue'³¹ that follows Persian defeat, 9.108–114) but also with the picture of the Queen in Aeschylus' *Persians*, or the image of the court in the book of *Esther*. Each text forms part of a much wider discourse on the Persian court and Persian society, of which only fragments remain.³²

In short, it is not so easy to disinter kernels of historical fact from their context. There is no single Greek pejorative coating that can be washed off.³³ It is likely indeed that some of the distortion that traditions of the Persian court underwent occurred before

²⁴ See Baines 1996.

²⁵ See the parallel observations of Brosius 2013, 661—although her Herodotus is still inclined to apply "literary constructs" (such as the alternation of good king, bad king) rather mechanically.

²⁶ Harrison – Skinner 2020, 17–18.

²⁷ Raaflaub 2002.

²⁸ See Harrison, forthcoming b.

²⁹ A leitmotif in the work of John Moles, e.g. 2002.

³⁰ On gender relations as informing the portrayal of Persia, see esp. Boedeker 2011 (p. 228 for Persia as unexceptional).

³¹ Olmstead 1948, 266–267.

³² Cf. Harrison 2000, 44–47.

³³ Harrison 2011, 20.

they reached Herodotus, and within the Persian orbit. (This is the argument advanced by Dominique Lenfant of the discourse of Persian decadence in the fourth century, but the same holds true of earlier traditions.³⁴) The approach of looking to distinguish kernels from shells also, however, detracts from potentially more interesting prizes. In general, we might judge that Herodotus' 'mistakes' (the female Mitra, for example) are at least as revealing as what he gets right: revealing both of the gulf of understanding between this individual Greek and Persian society and of the attempt to bridge that gulf. (In his account of Persian aniconism, for example, we see also the subtle infusion of Greek philosophical debates: 1.131).³⁵ When it comes to Persian imperialism, Herodotus' account is perhaps fruitful in two main ways. On the one hand, it is rich in echoes of Persian royal ideology, not least in the Council Scene at the beginning of Book 7. The trope of the King as a global policeman, for example, holding the provinces back from commotion and preventing one man from smiting the other (DSe 30–34) is recalled in Mardonius' uncomprehending response to the perpetual cycle of Greek internecine warfare: "Since they all speak the same language, [they should] make use of heralds and messengers to settle their differences" (7.5; cf. 5.49).³⁶ On the other hand, his account also yields an impressively detailed picture of what we might term the mechanics of Persian imperialism: its systematic scoping of foreign conquests, for example, or diplomatic preliminaries to campaigning.³⁷ He paints a picture, in particular, of a dynamic whereby restless Persian expansion and exploitation depends upon the ambition and initiative, the acquisitiveness and competition, of a host of royal courtiers. The Greek Histiaeus swears to Darius (falsely) that he would not change his tunic until he had made Sardinia subject to the King (5.106). One satrap is portrayed as taunting another for failing to add the island of Samos to the King's possessions (3.120); "you can't be said to be a man" (σὺ γὰρ ἐν ἀνδρῶν λόγῳ). The pressure that the King feels (Xerxes at 7.8*a*) to add to his power, to keep up with his predecessors, is a pressure that is devolved onto his many lieutenants.

All of this material is (of course) shaped by distinctive authorial agendas. In the case of the Council Scene, a whole series of tropes of Persian ideology are integrated: the imperative of avenging those who have done you harm; the ambition of world conquest;³⁸ the King's genealogizing; his self-control; his dislike of slander. But these themes are then recast into a dramatic scene, the overall lesson of which is partly about fate and partly about the failures of leadership. It is a story of how a terrible ill-fated decision can be made on the basis of a cocktail of bad motives: individuals' self-interest, imperial paranoia, concerns for appearance, and deceit. (We may all be able to think of parallels in more recent history.) Herodotus' analysis of the mechanics of Persian imperialism may betray signs both of schematism and moralism. In both cases, however, what Herodotus gives us is a reconstruction of Persian imperialism which is highly informed,

³⁴ Lenfant 2001.

³⁵ Cf. Xenophanes, DK 21 B 14–16, with Gaifman 2012, 97. Cf. Thomas 2011, 237, for the "interesting interweaving of supposed fact, believed fantasy and partly theorized ideals" of the Persian ethnography.

³⁶ See Harrison 2015 (with further references).

³⁷ Prospecting: 3.17–25, 134; 4.43–44, with Martin 1965. Diplomacy: e.g. 1.76; 6.48–49, 94; 7.32, 146–147, 150–151.

³⁸ Cf. Wiesehöfer 2004, with a more negative view of Herodotus' value as evidence here.

if partial; contemporary to the Persian empire if not to the events he describes. (Why ever would we discard this in favour of a few isolated facts?)

By contrast to this image of an author actively engaged with the lived reality of Persian imperialism, the judgements on Herodotus with which this paper began tend to assume a significant distance from Persia, what was once described by David Lewis—in the context of arguing against it—as a “political and linguistic iron curtain” between the Greek and Persian worlds.³⁹ This is a curtain that can be breached only by occasional breakthrough sources. In the context of Herodotus, the source most notorious in past scholarship is perhaps the younger Zopyrus, mentioned fleetingly at the end of book 3 (3.160).⁴⁰ There is still perhaps a tendency to fixate on particular highways for the communication of information on Persia: the ships returning from the Athenian expedition to Egypt, the embassy of the Athenian Callias to Persepolis in the middle of the fifth century.⁴¹ This concentration on a few privileged routes of information is in some respects absurd, however, given other evidence for contact. In particular, we should remember the tens of thousands of slaves of foreign origin—as many as half of whom may have come from within the Persian empire.⁴² These slaves are surely likely to have helped to shape Greeks’ ‘knowledge’ of foreign lands and peoples.⁴³ Of course, it might be argued that the knowledge that may have been derived by such indirect means could not have generated the hard data of history. In a memorable passage on Greek acquisition of foreign languages that seems itself to date from another age, A. B. Lloyd, for example, insisted on the importance of remembering⁴⁴

that it is possible to know languages in many different ways and at very different levels. Mercenaries who had served in the Persian army or merchants in Asia Minor selling produce to Persian soldiers or administrators might acquire their two hundred words or so of Persian and be perfectly fluent when dealing with a closed context like the drill yard or selling onions, but this does not mean that they would be capable of dealing with Iranian theology or of extracting detailed information on the organization of the army dispatched by Xerxes to bring the Greeks to heel. It is also easy to forget that speaking a language, even quite well, is one thing; being able to read and exploit documentary sources is quite another. So, a smattering of Persian might well have been found amongst certain Greeks in certain Greek states, but it would have been roughly equivalent to waiter’s English in a modern tourist resort and would hardly have provided Greeks with an open-sesame into Persian culture.

At the same time, however, even if the ‘knowledge’ generated by slaves, merchants and mercenaries may have carried with it inevitable distortions, there is surely likely to have been a continuum between this and the researches of the historian, with his “heterogeneous and haphazard” sources.⁴⁵ My formulations earlier (Herodotus as a highly informed contemporary, “actively engaged”)—though they strain in the right direction—are indeed still inadequate. We are inclined to describe the historian as if he were—but for the data at his disposal perhaps—a coolly detached social scientist observing the institu-

³⁹ D. M. Lewis 1985, 104.

⁴⁰ “I am not a Zopyros man myself”: D. M. Lewis 1985, 105; contrast Munson 2009, 464.

⁴¹ See the survey of Miller 1997, ch. 1.

⁴² D. Lewis 2011.

⁴³ Harrison 2019, esp. 52–53.

⁴⁴ A. B. Lloyd, in discussion of Briant 1990, 109.

⁴⁵ West 2011, 255.

tions of civil society in a faraway state. “Herodotus, of course,” Flower concedes, “was not entirely independent of the biases of his own culture.”⁴⁶ But stories of Persia and of Persian imperialism—or of the Athenian imperialism that was its analogue—were, surely, everyday things for our author. In this broader sense, this was a history in which Herodotus was a *participant*, and a history which could not be anything other than personal.⁴⁷ Herodotus’ account of Persia, then, may present challenges—challenges more profound indeed, and harder to accommodate, than the usual invocation of a simplistic Hellenic victor’s bias.⁴⁸ His account, however, is a world away from the caricature frequently offered of it.⁴⁹

Against this backdrop, if we turn now to the question of Herodotus’ sympathy for Persia and the Persians, the varying responses—that his position was broadly either pejorative or sympathetic—are perhaps equally unsatisfying. The idea, first, that Herodotus’ attitude to Persia was straightforwardly pejorative or ‘Orientalist’ is perhaps usually asserted or taken for granted rather than argued for. Whether Herodotus misunderstands Persia through his own malice or by being misled by his sources, there is simply a need to conclude that his picture is negative before you can duly flag it up as unreliable. The picture of an Orientalist Herodotus, however, faces some difficulties. The first difficulty is the wider context. Orientalism provides a useful model both for the way in which Greeks constructed their knowledge of foreign peoples (a “structure of attitude and reference,” in Edward Said’s term).⁵⁰ and in which ethnographic knowledge served as a charter for subsequent conquest.⁵¹ And modern imperialists or “clash of civilisations” ideologues have looked back to the ancient world for evidence that their own ideas were somehow timeless.⁵² At the same time, however, the geopolitical conditions in the ancient world were very different.⁵³ One cannot simply elide ancient and modern into one long continuity. It was Persia that was dominant. As Herodotus’ account makes very evident, with

⁴⁶ Flower 2006, 276 (continuing: “and even if he were the plot line demanded that the Greeks be the defenders of liberty against Persian aggression”). Cf. Munson 2009, 457: Herodotus “genuinely attempts to understand foreign cultures on their own terms and, in the case of Persia, he is in an exceptionally privileged position to do so.”

⁴⁷ Contrast the emphasis of West 2011, 261: Herodotus “must have absorbed *some impressions* of the Persian Empire from an early age” (my italics).

⁴⁸ So, e.g., Bowie 2007, 2 (“caution is always wise when using documents by one people about another, especially when the writers come from one race that has unexpectedly vanquished the other, and also made great use of that victory in the construction of their self-image”).

⁴⁹ A striking example is this summary by Josef Wiesehöfer (2009, 69): “Darius initially desires both revenge on those two cities and the subjugation of all other Greek states. This campaign of vengeance, which Darius’s son Xerxes (486–465 b.c.e.) continues, explodes into a campaign for world domination. The ensuing personal and military catastrophes of Xerxes and his army are caused both by the transgression of divinely ordained borders and the fact that the Persians have long given up their freedom to the command of the king. In the end, Persian rule is again limited to Asia. This is Herodotus’s view of Persian empire building.”

⁵⁰ A phrase from his *Culture and Imperialism*, 1993, xxxvi; for Orientalism as a “structure of cultural domination,” 1977, 24.

⁵¹ See esp. Vasunia 2001.

⁵² See Harrison – Skinner 2020, 5–6; a more recent example is Pagden 2008 (see e.g. p. xvii).

⁵³ See here Harrison 2000, 41–42; Kim 2009, 2; Vlassopoulos 2013, 321; Mac Sweeney 2013, 203.

its crowded cast of characters drawing the Greek and Persian world closer together as they seek patronage from the King or his satraps, Greece orbited around a Persian sun.⁵⁴

The evidence, secondly, for an Orientalist Herodotus, charting the inevitable path of Persian decadence and decline, is itself sketchy.⁵⁵ Certainly Herodotus' *Histories* present a kind of arc in Persian history: from the hardy, brilliant Cyrus through to the defeat of Xerxes—an arc confirmed in the last chapter of the *Histories* with its flashback to the early days of empire. The close of the *Histories*, and especially the prior scene of the execution of the Persian Artayctes by Xanthippus, the father of Pericles, overlooking the Hellespont (9.120), might be taken to point to the displacement of Persia by another empire, that of the Athenians.⁵⁶ At the same time, however, there are other indications that complicate this picture. On one interpretation, for example, the scene's location—at the same spot where the Athenians were defeated in the naval battle of Aegospotami—points to the subsequent eclipse of their empire.⁵⁷

Similarly complex is the previous scene in which Xerxes' love for his brother's wife prompts an implosion of the Persian court. This has often been deployed as evidence for Herodotus subscribing to a model of Persian decadence, to the belief that the empire never recovered from its defeat at Greek hands.⁵⁸ This convoluted episode can be put together with a passage within the Council Scene where Xerxes presents the impending campaign as a war for survival (7.11.2–3):

εὖ ἐπιστάμενος ὅτι εἰ ἡμεῖς ἡσυχίην ἄξομεν, ἀλλ' οὐκ ἐκείνοι, ἀλλὰ καὶ μάλα στρατεύσονται ἐπὶ τὴν ἡμετέραν, εἰ χρὴ σταθμώσασθαι τοῖσι ὑπαργμένοισι ἐξ ἐκείνων, οἱ Σάρδις τε ἐνέπρησαν καὶ ἤλασαν ἐς τὴν Ἀσίην. οὐκὼν ἐξαναχωρέειν οὐδετέροισι δυνατῶς ἔχει, ἀλλὰ ποιέειν ἢ παθεῖν πρόκειται ἀγών, ἵνα ἢ τάδε πάντα ὑπὸ Ἑλλήσι ἢ ἐκείνα πάντα ὑπὸ Πέρσησι γένηται· τὸ γὰρ μέσον οὐδὲν τῆς ἔχθρης ἐστί.

I know well that if we remain at peace, those people [the Athenians] will not. They will certainly march against our territory, if it is possible to make a judgement from what they have initiated before, they who burnt Sardis and invaded Asia. For it is impossible for either side to back down now, but the choice before us is whether we act or remain passive. And then either everything of ours will belong to the Greeks, or everything of theirs to the Persians. For there is no middle path in this conflict.

The difficulty with this reading, however, is that from Herodotus' own vantage-point—at least half a century later than the Persian wars, during the Atheno-Peloponnesian wars in which Persia remained a crucial off-stage presence⁵⁹—any conception of the Achaemenid empire as neutered and prone would have appeared absurd. The rhetoric of “it's them or us,” of a fight for survival between two superpowers, is likely to be rooted in the equation of Athenian and Persian imperialism (for which see further below), but should

⁵⁴ A further irony here is that the attempt to decolonize Persian history results in an excessive identification with Persian imperialism: one can rehabilitate Cambyses on the grounds that he is one of “les bâtisseurs de l'empire” (a heading of Briant 1996 [2002]). Cf. Harrison 2011, 55–56.

⁵⁵ Cf. Flower 2006, 284: “One should be wary of reducing a work as complex and as subtle as the *Histories* to a single and fairly banal explanatory formula.”

⁵⁶ So, e.g., Boedeker 1988; Dewald 1997.

⁵⁷ Irwin 2018.

⁵⁸ So, e.g. (of recent contributions), Brosius 2013, 660; Colburn 2019, 8.

⁵⁹ For a compelling case for a late date, see Irwin 2020 (more fully e.g. 2018).

also perhaps be seen as part of a characterisation of the feverish nature of Persian imperialism.⁶⁰ The close of the *Histories* then represents not so much the eclipse of Persian power as its being tamed, forced back within its natural boundaries.

The positive view of Herodotus' picture of Persia (a "moderate and respectful portrayal")⁶¹ is in line with a common view of Greek representations of the barbarian more broadly: the denial of an extreme or caricatured negative portrayal. So, for example, for Erich Gruen, the attitude of the Greeks was not one of "a blanket characterization of xenophobia and ethnocentrism."⁶² More specifically, Michael Flower has written of Herodotus on Persia that the Persians "are not depicted as weak and despicable rulers of an evil empire, who got their just deserts at the hands of morally and physically superior Greeks"; and indeed Pierre Briant finds that Herodotus "shows no signs of systematic hostility towards the Persians."⁶³ We might note in passing that such judgements of Herodotus as positive in his portrayal of the Persians (with their seemingly unspoken clause "given what one might reasonably expect...") seem at times to ascribe to Herodotus a kind of generous paternalism. (In a similar vein, the celebrated travel-writer Freya Stark described Herodotus' attitude to the foreign as "a very English opinion, that is to say that he would be interested in what is remote and pleased with its variety, and safe in the consciousness that his own was best.")⁶⁴ More importantly, however, such characterisations of Herodotus or of the Greeks are also informed by a wishful thinking. As Antti Lampinen has observed, positive characterisations are taken to indicate a more generally positive estimation of foreign peoples, but moments of negative characterisation are not generalised; instead we "demand from an author a 'blanket condemnation' of negative attributes."⁶⁵ Of course, the attitudes of the Greeks were not uniformly negative. In saying this, moreover, I am not referring solely to the variety of different individuals' perspectives, but to the complexity of the perspective of any single individual. The Greeks' world was a real one, like ours; their relationships and attitudes were shot through with contradictions.⁶⁶

A good example of this is the position evinced in the *Histories* in relation to Persian religion. Herodotus' account of foreign religions is usually cast by modern scholars in universalist terms: Greek, Egyptian and Persian gods' names can simply be translated one into the other. But there are contrary tendencies.⁶⁷ It is characteristic of foreign peoples that they fail to respect 'our' gods or cults (Greeks burn down temples by accident; barbarians do it on purpose⁶⁸—an intolerance that in turn arguably justifies 'our' contempt. It is also a characteristic of foreign peoples that they cannot distinguish between appropriate objects of worship (gods) and inappropriate (animals, men). Persian

⁶⁰ See further Harrison 2015.

⁶¹ Raaflaub 2011, 20, in the context of a judicious and balanced account of the different pressures bearing on Herodotus in respect of one aspect of Persia (warfare).

⁶² Gruen 2011, 3.

⁶³ Flower 2006, 275; Briant 2002, 7.

⁶⁴ Stark 1954, 141. I am grateful to Lucy Quine here.

⁶⁵ Lampinen 2011, 236; cf. Harrison 2020, 142.

⁶⁶ Miller (2011, 152) rightly sees the "same ambivalence" reflected in Herodotus as in contemporary vase images. Cf. also the concluding emphasis of Thomas 2011, 253.

⁶⁷ See further Harrison, forthcoming a.

⁶⁸ Parker 1983, 168, note 133.

religion, moreover, with its reduced cast of gods and the prominence of a 'Zeus' who is the sponsor of their imperial expansion (5.105; 7.8a), is characterised in a distinctly militaristic, and in some respects a primitive, guise. Herodotus' account, unquestionably, also includes a number of instances in which Persian respect for foreign cults is revealed—for example, Datis' extravagant statement of respect for Delian Apollo and Artemis (6.97)—but these sit awkwardly against the prevailing picture of Persians as sacrilegious. Similarly, though Herodotus reveals in his Persian ethnography that *proskynesis* is a social gesture performed by Persians to their social superiors (1.134), later in the *Histories* he recounts the stirring story of how the two Spartans sent to die at the Persian court refused to bow down to the King—on the grounds that “it was not customary for them to do obeisance to a man, and that it was not for that that they had come!” (οὔτε γὰρ σφίσι ἐν νόμῳ εἶναι ἄνθρωπον προσκυνέειν οὔτε κατὰ ταῦτα ἤκειν, 7.136). How can we resolve these conflicts? In the case of *proskynesis*, do we suppose that the author is distancing himself from the rhetoric of the second passage? Do we seek to explain the difference in terms of the different registers in play? Or conclude merely that he failed to achieve consistency in this respect? Perhaps the best conclusion—only slightly distinct, perhaps, from supposing a variety of registers—is to accept the seeming contradiction, and to suppose that the trope of *proskynesis* as worship (or of the kings as typically sacrilegious) was one that one could indulge in one moment, or context, and appreciate in a cooler, more ethnographic mode in the next.

Crucial here is the imbalance in the power-relationship between Greek and Persian worlds referred to above. A striking aspect of Athenian responses to Persian power is that, at the same time as distancing Persia—though stereotypes of Persia or the barbarian world are sometimes misleadingly seen as exclusively Athenian⁶⁹—Persia is, at the same time, adopted as a model for their own imperialism. The most famous, if for some controversial, instance of this is the borrowing of the festival metaphor of the Parthenon from the Apadana at Persepolis—a borrowing instigated, it is alleged, as a result of the embassy of Callias.⁷⁰ A possible further example may be the Athenian Old Bouleuterion, whose hypostyle architecture was unique, with the Eleusis Telesterion, in its time, but found wide precedent in the Near Eastern world.⁷¹ Is it far-fetched to note that the timing of this innovation followed shortly after another Athenian embassy, this time only as far as the satrapal capital of Sardis (5.73)? The analogy between Athenian and Persian imperialism is developed in literary terms as early as Aeschylus' *Persians*, where the list of Darius' conquests coincides neatly with the Athenians' contemporary gains. And it is satirized in the famous comic fragment of Hermippus in which—in parody of Persian texts like the Susa Foundation Charter—all the products brought to Athens from various locations are listed (“from Cyrene stalks of silphium and ox hide, from the Hellespont mackerel and salted fish of all sorts,” fr. 63).⁷² Such analogies between Athens and Persia highlight differences as well as similarities. In Aeschylus' *Persians*, the Athenians' democracy and their piety might be thought to inoculate the Athenians against the fate described for the Persians. Similarly, the proposition of the Parthenon's

⁶⁹ See here Harrison 2020, 142–144.

⁷⁰ Lawrence 1951; Root 1985; Miller 1997, ch. 9.

⁷¹ Paga 2000, 100 (and note 55), 114.

⁷² Vannicelli 2013, 31, note 19; Harrison 2020, 150.

debt to the Apadana is only defensible if we highlight the different *objects* of the festival procession: Athena or the King? Nevertheless, the Greeks' development of such analogies points clearly to a psychologically conflicted response to Persian power. On the one hand, it is possible to take pleasure in the narrative of how the underdog Greeks managed to cause such damage to the Persian cause, or to give emphasis to the Greeks' differences (piety or democracy). On the other hand, there is a reluctant acknowledgement—admiration even—of superior Persian power.

Within the pages of the *Histories*, we can see traces of a pride in the success of the sons of Greek cities within the structures of Persian power. The instigator of the Ionian revolt, Histiaeus, is portrayed as the close confidant of the King, the two dining alone together, when the status of *syntrophos* was surely given to a cast of thousands.⁷³ “Artaphernes is my friend,” boasts Histiaeus' lieutenant Aristagoras. Conversely, Persian royals are represented as fixated on the good things of the Greek world. Atossa makes the case to the King for his attacking Greece—prompted in so doing by another successful arriviste, the doctor Democedes—by expressing her desire for Greek servant girls (3.134): “let the Scythians go for the present; you shall have them whenever you like; I tell you, march against Hellas. I have heard of Laconian and Argive and Attic and Corinthian women, and would like to have them as servants.” When Democedes, sent to prospect the Greek world on behalf of the King, manages to escape from his Persian minders, he shouts out to them as they set sail to pass back to Darius the message that he was engaged to the daughter of the wrestler Milon (3.137.5):

τοῦ γὰρ δὴ παλαιστῆω Μίλωνος ἦν οὖνομα πολλὸν παρὰ βασιλείῃ· κατὰ δὲ τοῦτό μοι δοκέει σπεῦσαι τὸν γάμον τοῦτον τελέσας χρήματα μεγάλα Δημοκίδης, ἵνα φανῇ πρὸς Δαρείου ἔων καὶ ἐν τῇ ἑαυτοῦ δόκιμος.

For indeed Darius held the name of Milon the wrestler in great honour; and, to my thinking, Democedes sought this marriage and paid a large amount of money for it, so that he might appear to Darius to be a notable figure in his own country.

While his father was a fan of Greek sport, Xerxes was reputed to have known the contents of Delphi better than his own palace (8.35). The King, in effect, is put into the position of the South Asian businessman with whom I began, pathetically craving entry into the one society that will not accept him, desperate to add the wealth of Apollo to his own vast treasures. From our vantage-point, however, it is not hard to see layers of self-delusion in the Greek perspective, to see the Greeks as the ones who crave affirmation. Even the King really knows, such stories seem to be suggesting, that our wives, our sport, our treasures are better; that is why he is set on conquering us.⁷⁴ Deep down, like Democedes, we still want to look big in the eyes of the King.⁷⁵

⁷³ For proximity to the King at dinners as restricted and graduated, see e.g., Xen. *Cyr.* 8.4.3–5; Plut. *Artax.* 5.3; Heracleides, *FGrH* 689 F 2 (cf. Arr. *Anab.* 7.11.8, Diod. Sic. 19.22); for the King's dinner more widely, see e.g., Lewis 1987; Briant 1989.

⁷⁴ The story of Pausanias' display of Spartan and Persian meals in Mardonius' tent, 9.82, might be thought to be part of the same current of traditions, although it also illustrates the deluded nature of the King's fixation.

⁷⁵ I am influenced here by the insights of Jon Elster, e.g. 2007. See also here Miller 2011, 145–148 for Greek fascination with the image of the enthroned Persian.

I return one final time to the model of the 'nugget' or kernel. The important point to make is not only that to remove the 'coating' from the 'kernel' is a difficult procedure but that it is a misguided one. We can express this cautiously. We can say that there is no possibility of unmediated access to 'Persia' or the Persian empire; different sources are variously useful for different historical questions. We might also point out that the history of an empire has to be written from the perspective of its subjects as well as the imperial centre. If we were to substitute Persian imperialism for British, it would be clear that to dismiss an Indian perspective on British imperialism because of its misunderstandings, say, on the relationship between Crown and Government, would be bizarre. That perspective is instead, surely, one that we would cherish as part of a kind of mosaic.⁷⁶ If again we substituted Persian imperialism for British, it is hard to see how we might deploy the artistic programmes generated in the imperial centre as reflective of the attitudes to the empire of its subject peoples.⁷⁷ The more positive way of framing this then is that such rich, conflicted (sometimes, even muddled) responses to the Persian empire as preserved by Herodotus should not just be understood through the prism of their narrow veracity⁷⁸—on the basis of a simplistic conception of historical 'bias,'⁷⁹ or an assumption of history as concerned exclusively with institutions and a single plausible narrative: these responses are themselves the stuff of history.

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⁷⁶ Cf. Harrison 2011, 122.

⁷⁷ Cf. Root 2007.

⁷⁸ Cf. the similar observations of Flower 2006, 278. Munson 2009, 457–458: "Although Herodotus, needless to say, does not get everything right, he provides a great deal of authentic information. Even some of his inaccuracies are illuminating, as they are rooted in Persian traditions or discourse."

⁷⁹ Cf. Harrison 2011, 30–32.

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