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The Pursuit of Happiness? Persian (Hi)stories of Empire and Domination

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ABSTRACT: This paper engages with recent scholarship on Herodotus' understanding of Persian (ideologies of) imperialism. It is suggested that the *Histories* offer a coherent counter-narrative of Achaemenid history as one of (successful) conquest and, ideally, never-ending expansion. Critical episodes of royal campaigns across imperial borderlands are scrutinized to prove this argument. Against the background of long-standing ancient Near Eastern conceptions of kingship and rulership as resting upon divinely sanctioned success, Herodotus' account of Persian military failures calls into question the king's foundational claims to authority and, with them, the very rationale of his empire's place in the world: to bring 'happiness for mankind'. By contrast, Herodotus crafted the *Histories* as an act of mimicry of and resistance to said project. He developed his masterpiece within the framework of, and as a reaction to, discourses about history and empire which, under the Great Kings, seem to have been more widespread, constructed and impactful than usually thought.

KEYWORDS: Achaemenid Empire, borderlands, Herodotus, historiography, imperial turn, ἱστορίη, royal ideology

> *Baga vaz̨rka A.uramazdā, // haya maθišta bagānām, // haya imam būmīm adā, // haya avam asmanām adā, // haya martiyam adā // haya šiyātim adā martiyahyā.*
> A great god is Ahura Mazda, the greatest of the gods, who created this earth, who created yonder sky, who created mankind, created happiness for mankind.
>
> XEa § 1

> ἄνδρες Πέρσαι, οὔτ' αὐτὸς κατηγήσομαι νόμον τόνδε ἐν ὑμῖν τιθείς, παραδεξάμενός τε αὐτῷ χρήσομαι.
> Men of Persia, I am not bringing in and establishing a new custom but following one I have inherited.
>
> Hdt. 7.8α.1

Introduction: the historian's craft in the age of Persia

The *Histories* were intended by their author and received by their audience fundamentally as a history of Persian imperialism.[1] Although only the third book is devoted to Persia proper (the territories, beginning with Elam, in which the Persian ethnogenesis took shape), the spaces and peoples discussed in the rest of the work enter Herodotus' investigation through their encounter with and

[1] On Herodotus as a historian of ancient Near Eastern kingship and empire-building, which culminated with, but was older than, the Teispid-Achaemenids, see Degen 2022b and Oellig 2023: 288–351. Ma 2024: 70 sees the *Histories* as 'a vast panorama drawing on local oral traditions of the life of the *poleis*'. The imperial horizon of the work is absent.

subsequent absorption by the rising power of the Great Kings.[2] It is therefore scarcely surprising that questions regarding the sources accessible to, known and exploited by Herodotus for his history and ethnography of the Persian Empire have captured scholarly attention.[3] For present purposes, it is worth mentioning some recent insights whose transformative potential for the subject treated here cannot be underestimated.[4]

First, there is the growing awareness of how much the Achaemenid conception of space (at least as it emerges mainly from the royal inscriptions) impacted Herodotus' mental geography.[5] For example, the *Histories* often reproduce lists of individuals and resources mobilized on behalf of the king at critical points throughout the narrative. This is much more than simply the passive (and unfaithful) reflection of accounting devices or classificatory schemes.[6] If read against the background of Persian evidence (royal inscriptions and administrative tablets), they betray Herodotus' conscious reception of what the Persians clearly understood as an organizing principle of the world – and, hence, a crucial tool upholding their rule.[7] After all, Persian 'charting' stands in a long tradition of ancient Near Eastern mapping and registering: both played a critical role in the production of knowledge and, consequently, state power (a distinctive feature of other imperial formations worldwide).[8] Moreover, Herodotus' handling of Persian imperial tools illustrates local(ized) intentional adaptation of this same device to suit the intellectual interests and political purposes of different audiences across the Persian imperial space.[9] This implies that both the physical and the narrative

[2] Cf. Rollinger 2023a. See Asheri in Asheri et al. 1990: 9–24 (introduction to Book 3) and Asheri in Asheri et al. 2007: 379–527 (commentary).

[3] Miller 2011 (reception of Achaemenid artistic tastes and lifestyle in Herodotus' world); West 2011 (sources and their use); Wiesehöfer 2014 (Herodotus' intellectual engagement with Persia as an empire); Harrison 2015 (Herodotus and Achaemenid imperialism). Cf. Murray 1987 on Herodotus' oral sources on Achaemenid history, with Pelling 2019: 129–45.

[4] Irwin 2024 on the *Histories*' 'publication' and reception; Kubisch and Klinkott 2024 on literature and identity in Herodotus.

[5] Dan 2013 and Rapin 2018, with Jacobs 2017 on the lists of lands/peoples (Old Persian *ahaṃyāva*, Elamite *batinp*, Akkadian *mātātu* (KUR.KUR), Aramaic *mt*: DB_p col. I § 6, DB_e § 6, DB_b § 6). Scholarship on geographical thinking before the *Histories* still overlooks its broader imperial intellectual context (Pownall 2013 is conspicuously silent on this issue, but cf. now Degen 2024b on 'inherited geographies'). Anaximander created a world map (DK 12 A6), later improved by Hecataeus (according to Agathemerus: see *BNJ* 1 T12a). Herodotus' critique of his predecessors (4.36) may suggest that his greater knowledge of the Achaemenid Empire entitled him to enter current debates on what the space he lived in looked like. As for Xenophanes' interest in a stranger's origins, mentioned in the same breath as the coming 'of the Mede' (DK 21 B22), besides the Homeric memory, its proper intellectual context is the sudden opening up of the world that followed Ionia's embedding in the newborn Achaemenid Empire. Cf. Proietti and McInerney forthcoming. Accounts from Pasargadae, where Lydian craftsmen are known to have been employed, may provide one avenue of transmission for this expanded spatial knowledge (Stronach 1978). See Rollinger 2008 and Rollinger and Kellner 2019 on Cyrus' Lydian campaign (after 547 BC, contrary to Llewellyn-Jones 2022: 62–3).

[6] Jacobs 2003.

[7] Blankenship 2022: 87–91, on the Achaemenid background ('format, interests, and organizational strategies') of Herodotus' list of imperial peoples.

[8] Kirk 2011: 151–64. See Hostetler 2021 on imperial mapping and list-recording in world history.

[9] Another case study (from Yehud) can be found in Blankenship forthcoming. Thanks to Dr

worlds of Herodotus are, first and foremost, representations of (and responses to) a Persian universe, or at least an environment constructed as a function of the spatial coordinates emanating from the imperial court (and as such ideologically charged).[10] Rather than merely in the reductive and simplistic terms of a Greek interpretation of Persian spatial language (of whose ethnocentrism Herodotus is perfectly aware), the geography of the *Histories* could, on the contrary, also be read as a subtle problematization of the self-representation of the Achaemenid Empire as the entire universe in microcosm.[11]

Some scholars have further noted Herodotus' tendency to use narrative structures and topics characteristic of ancient Near Eastern kingship, bending them to his purposes of refutation and critique.[12] His use of Mesopotamian oracular tropes related to the ruler's health or his accession to the throne is a telling if underappreciated case in point.[13] Awareness of such narrative devices is of fundamental importance because it demonstrates a mastery of socio-anthropological categories and the rhetoric of Achaemenid power that goes far beyond the more explicit and accessible array of royal inscriptions. Hence, there is a need for scholarship to take seriously what Herodotus puts into the mouths of the Achaemenid rulers, especially when it comes to programmatic statements: that is, those that directly (claim to) represent the meaning assigned by the Great Kings in the *Histories* to their role in the empire's framework and to the significance of the Achaemenid realm. More recently, it has been suggested that we interpret the origins of Greeks' speculation on their past as triggered by close confrontation with the rhetorical and intellectual strategies devised by Persian rulers and their administrative and bureaucratic apparatus to organize the past, interpret the present and imagine the future.[14] Herodotus' ἱστορίη is the apex of this tradition, and it needs to be appreciated against that background. As famously argued by Arnaldo Momigliano, 'there was no Herodotus before Herodotus'. Yet earlier forms of Greek historical thought – meaning some form of intellectual engagement with the past (of one's own family, community, or even the wider world) – still require spatial and chronological qualifications: they must be assessed in context.[15] This

Blankenship for kindly providing an advanced draft of her compelling paper.

[10] Note the fleeting mention of India (3.94.2), despite Herodotus' awareness of the ideological importance Darius attributed to the control of the Punjab, as shown by the account of Skylax's voyage down the Indus (4.44 with Matarese 2021: 70–3). Bactria might have received a similar treatment, as demonstrated by Stefan Härtel in a forthcoming paper.

[11] Hdt. 1.134.2 on Persian ethnocentrism. That the *nomoi* list, and therefore the empire, begins in Ionia (3.90.1) might imply more than just a Greek point of view on Achaemenid domains. It reminds the audience of the wider world beyond the Anatolian coasts not (yet) under Persian control. In contrast, imperial geography dismissed this fact either through vague mentions ('the lands beyond the sea' in DPe) or wrote the Greek coast off the map altogether, as in DHa § 2 (Spardā, Lydia, as the westernmost borderland). See most recently Degen forthcoming (a) on Herodotus' discourse on Persian imperialism.

[12] García Sánchez 2009: 114–24. See also Allgaier 2022: 51. Herodotus thought of his work as competing with (and surpassing) Darius' epigraphic record-keeping of his triumphs at the empire's edges.

[13] Rollinger 2017.

[14] Blankenship 2022.

[15] Momigliano 1958: 3; Proietti 2021: 43–57.

paper contends that, at a minimum, specific topics and thematic patterns (if not the entire structure) of Herodotus' *Histories* arose, or were structured over time, in response to a Persian historical and historiographic tradition.[16] Although underappreciated, it is argued that one cornerstone of this tradition is a narrative of the empire's rationale as the pinnacle of human history and harbinger of 'Happiness for Mankind': this is a recursive claim in imperial tradition worldwide and it features widely across the Persian royal inscriptions.[17]

Despite the thin evidence, this claim can be substantiated already in the generation before Herodotus – living and writing during the early phase of Persian (imperial) history.[18] Hecataeus of Miletus is the place to start. The notorious opening statement in one of his works (the *Genealogies*?) has usually been interpreted either squarely within a Greek cultural environment (Homer, Hesiod) or against the background of ancient Near Eastern epistolography.[19] However, comparison with the proemial sentence of the first paragraph of the Bisutun Inscription suggests that deeper ideological layers are at work here.[20] The text runs as follows: 'Darius the King says thus ...'.[21] This is not just any message (written, and likely also oral), nor any sort of letter. Indeed, this trilingual inscription stands out as the most ideologically committed (explicitly so) and historically engaged of all the extant royal inscriptions. Taken as a whole (text and iconography), it is unique within the ancient Near Eastern world – of whose epigraphic tradition it also represents, in several respects, the crowning achievement.[22] Against such a backdrop, the celebrated Ἑκαταῖος Μιλήσιος ὧδε μυθεῖται looks less like the birth of a Greek rationalizing attitude towards the past and more a competitive engagement with – or a reaction to – what represented the benchmark of an authoritative account of the past according to Achaemenid discourse.[23] To claim that Bisutun may have served as a point of reference for Hecataeus' intellectual and rhetorical posturing is less audacious than it seems. After all, the 'monumental' features of his F1,

[16] Following Gehrke 2014 and Blankenship 2022, it is time to look at Persian intellectual devices to organize and spin the empire's past, like the royal inscriptions or the lists featured in the administrative documents, as examples of ancient Near Eastern 'intentional history'.

[17] Lincoln 2012.

[18] Porciani 2001 on 'early forms of Greek historiography'.

[19] Corcella 1996: 296–8; Pownall 2013. Jacoby 1995: 319 notes in passing the status of Hecataeus' opening phrase as a pivotal moment for the whole subsequent tradition of ἱστορίαι.

[20] It may even be suggested that Darius' emphasis on his genealogy could have influenced Hecataeus' interest in the subject, as it provided the Greek tradition of mythistorical origins with an expanded geographical context and an awe-inspiring tradition of power. Cf. Hdt. 7.61.2–3, claiming Perseus as the forefather of the Persians, and Klinkott 2024 on Darius' genealogical claims and the related 'Imperial Aura'.

[21] DB_p col. I § 2: Old Persian *θātiy Dārayavayš xšāyaθiya*; DB_e § 2: Elamite *ak ^{m}Dariyamauš ^{m}sunki nanri*; DB_b § 2: Akkadian *^{m}Dariyamuš šarru kiam iqabbi*.

[22] Shayegan 2012 on the Iranian context of the inscription's contents. As for their crafting and dissemination, see Rollinger 2016a. Rollinger 2016b discusses the monument's unique nature.

[23] See Schmitt 2014: 256 on the Old Persian verb *θā-* and Lincoln 2012: 397–8 on Darius speaking first in written form and having the last word on the events through the inscription itself. Richardson 2020 discusses the rhetorical strategies of claiming 'valid' rulership in the ancient Near East.

expressed in the third person singular like the narrative voice at Bisutun, were already recognized and discussed decades ago.[24]

However, to limit the discussion on Hecataeus' intellectual sources to Near Eastern traditions of letter writing (of which Bisutun would be a particularly formal and official example) would be too reductive, given how ideologically charged the inscription is.[25] Through the entire monument (text and inscription), Darius is evidently doing much more than simply delivering a written message.[26] He is telling a foundational story in which a 'numinous undertone' is patently structurally embedded. Furthermore, the story told at Bisutun is one that intimately involves the king's family, his rise to power, his credentials as a divinely appointed monarch and, ultimately, the very reasons for the Achaemenid Empire's existence.[27] The stakes were high, for the past evoked in the inscription as the explanation for Darius' exalted role as Great King was notoriously contested. So much so, in fact, that Darius – or his chancellery – set up two more trilingual inscriptions at Pasargadai: CMa and CMc, the latter preserved in Elamite and Akkadian, attributing to Cyrus an Achaemenid heritage that he never claimed for himself in texts such as the Cyrus Cylinder from Babylon.[28] Accordingly, Bisutun ought to be taken as the most outstanding testimony of ancient Near Eastern practices of intentional history. Indeed, its intellectual bottom line is a thoroughly planned, careful manipulation of the past (including the founder's family line and Darius' own) to serve Darius' political project in the present and bolster the future of his dynasty. This is clearly an example of revisionist history or, following in the footsteps of Hans-Joachim Gehrke, 'time spinning' at it finest.[29] In the suggestive words of Marshall Sahlins, it is 'the creation of cultural order'.[30]

[24] Svenbro 1991: 149–50. Bertelli 2001: 76–94 on Hecataeus as an historian. Bertelli's claim (p. 94) that the Milesian 'invented' something like 'chronological genealogy' should be confronted with Darius' display of his family tree in the Bisutun Inscription, where the 'historical' rationale of claiming a right to kingship more ancient, and thus more authoritative, than any of his competitors – including Cyrus – could not be more explicit.

[25] Corcella 1996: 298 argues for Herodotus' debt to this tradition.

[26] This applies to Bisutun and every example of Darius' epigraphic activity. Herodotus shows he was aware of the inscriptions' implications for crafting and spreading the Achaemenid's take on the history of one Great King and the empire. He engaged critically, at times subversively, with this Persian strategy of (historical) knowledge construction: Allgaier 2022: 39–51.

[27] Garrison 2011 and 2017.

[28] Schaudig 2001: 557–62 (edition and commentary) with Waters 2014: 148–50; Waters 2023: 379–81. Is the absence of an Old Persian version only an accident of preservation or does it signal something about a narrative strategy, conveying different messages to different audiences among the imperial elite? After all, Achaemenid trilingual inscriptions are not three versions of the same text, but three different narratives to be studied in parallel: cf. Hyland 2014 on the example of casualty numbers.

[29] Gehrke 2014: his analysis focuses on the Greek world, but it may be time to expand the focus beyond it, to cultures with which the Greeks interacted over a long period and for which it can be shown, or at least suggested, that manipulation of history served political goals or, more broadly, purposes of identity building, such as the Persians. See Klinkott 2024.

[30] Gehrke 2007; Foxhall and Luraghi 2010. Sahlins 2022: 47: 'Speech is impelled by breath. Breath is life: Ergo, speech is the symbolic, life-giving power of the creation of co-cultural order. In which case, humans are not only spirits, but the original spirit, the genesis of spirit.' This may help make sense of the puzzling memory (Skjærvø 1999, 2005: explicit 'quotations') of passages in the (Old) *Avestā* in which Zarathustra is presented as assimilating himself with

There is more. The Great King explicitly claims to have written an 'account' (Old Persian *dipiciça*, Elamite *ʰtuppi.me amminnu*) of his deeds, not only on stone, but also other media (Old Persian *utā pavastāyā utā carmā gṛṭtam āha*: 'I crafted it [the inscription] in clay and on skin').[31] This narrative was circulated throughout the empire (Old Persian *vispadā antar dahɒyāva*: 'across all the lands/amongst all the [subject] people').[32] As shown by the Aramaic fragments recovered in Egypt, the Bisutun account circulated in languages other than the enigmatic Ariya).[33] Hecataeus' τάδε γράφω suddenly acquires a precedent and a competitor too significant and inspiring not to engage with.[34] Unfortunately, it is unclear (and perhaps impossible to know) how exactly Hecataeus might have gained knowledge of the Bisutun Inscription's form and content. One possibility may be rehearsal or performances such as those displayed by Xerxes across the Bosphorus. These spectacles of power, by the king or his satrapal representatives, served as a prime stage to enact crucial tenets of Persian ideology and historical world-view.[35] Ancient Near Eastern kings had used strategies like this for centuries and would continue to do so at least up to Antiochos IV and arguably beyond.[36] Furthermore, the archival evidence demonstrates that on specific occasions, peaking around the New Year, delegations from every corner of the empire visited the king at Persepolis, in some cases touring the heartland, likely visiting particularly significant sites, among which Bisutun stands out as particularly meaningful.[37] Elites from Asia Minor and beyond across the eastern Mediterranean (*Yauṇā* in the inscriptions) might have been among them (Indians were), and it is reasonable to assume that, as co-opted imperial agents – who, as such, benefited from the king's grace and power – they were expected to report back home on what they had seen and been told. If this was the kind of discourse Hecataeus engaged with, it must have been the case also for Herodotus, given how often he makes use of phrasing analogous to the famous τάδε γράφω.[38] If this is so, the next question to address is why, and through what

Ahura Mazda. Achaemenid inscriptions 'are programmatically conceived as externalizations of historical data, for the consumption of audiences present and future' (Blankenship 2022: 82).

31 Schmitt 2009: 87.

32 Schmitt 2009: 87.

33 Schmitt 2009: 87. See Schmitt 2014: 136: 'Ariya' may be a reference to Old Persian as a *lingua franca* of a vaguely identified group of Iranian peoples (encompassing more than the Persians).

34 DB_P col. V § 70 for Darius' emphasis on having inscribed his deeds, with discussion in Schmitt 2014: 169–70 (the enigmatic term *dipiciça*). According to Ceccarelli 2013: 125–6, Herodotus' presentation of the Great Kings' deeds and words is structured following a principle of homology that might have been influenced by a text such as Bisutun. Indeed, Darius' words and the catalogic, all-encompassing, 'factual' (or presented as such) style of the exposition (in the Akkadian version, moreover, filled with casualty numbers: Hyland 2014) merge into one another.

35 Hyland forthcoming.

36 Harrison 2023.

37 King 2022.

38 According to Corcella 1996: 297, oral messages could be and were easily turned into (perishable) written ones and then engraved. Cf. Hdt. 6.24.1 (messenger to Histiaios), 7.150.2 (messenger to Argos), 8.68α.1 (Artemisia sending Mardonios with a message to the king). If the key point of reference of both Hecataeus and Herodotus is Bisutun, the written version takes precedence over any oral rendering of it, for it is highly unlikely that Darius dictated part of

means, the *Histories* engage with the Persian variant(s) of imperial historical craft such as that on display at Bisutun.[39]

These are two core issues to be explored in this paper by a close reading of key episodes in the *Histories* against the Achaemenid intellectual programme, as far as the latter can be reconstructed.[40] In particular, the discussion below suggests that one of the leading motifs of the work (the repeated failure of the Achaemenid rulers' expansionist aims from Cyrus to Xerxes) should be understood as a subversive disavowal of a cornerstone of the self-representation of the Great Kings of Persia: that is, the idea of their invincibility on the battlefield and their capacity to add new territories to the empire in a constant progression stretching asymptotically towards the edges of the universe.[41] Before we continue, it is necessary to comment briefly on comparative scholarship on empires in order to better contextualize Achaemenid history (and historiography) and the insights into Herodotus' world-view that engaging with this literature may provide.[42]

Comparative, world-historical study of empires is thriving.[43] As the first uncontested geopolitical actor in Afro-Eurasia (a 'hyper-power', as Strootman calls it), the Teispid-Achaemenid Persian Empire is gaining increasing prominence in the field.[44] Recent scholarship has focused particularly on the Great Kings' ideology of universal rule. The trope of overcoming natural boundaries located in the empire's borderlands was a crucial element in this narrative.[45] New notions of space and time (in a word: of history) developed in tandem with the empire and brought about a cartographic and conceptual revolution. There was no longer any room for anything

or the whole inscription (despite Bae 2001: 31–55). Herodotus, or even Hecataeus, may have consciously decontextualized Darius' loaded words, undermining their ideological potential by transforming them into a simple toolkit for a messenger (however high in rank, such as Artemisia). See furthermore Blankenship 2022: 85: 'The discourse of DB [Bisutun] moves back and forth too between the proclamatory voice of Darius and the documentary-style discourse of calendrical dates, casualty numbers and other statistical realia, which, though presented in the voice of the Great King, suggest the intervention of the scribes who have composed the text; the same tension is present in the other Achaemenid inscriptions, where what "the King says" is written on stone.' Such acts of 'Persianizing mimesis' are meant to undermine Darius' exclusive monopoly on the (written) word, and thus his control of the historical narrative and of history itself.

[39] Corcella himself suggests that 'a specific "Oriental" influence' is at work in Hecataeus' case (1996: 300). It is difficult not to think of Bisutun as the influence behind the forthright declaration Ἑκαταῖος Μιλήσιος ὧδε μυθεῖται. As Canfora 1979: 353 stresses, by boldly asserting his narrative persona and judgement at the outset, Hecataeus is clearly engaging with the king's claim to speak last. Other voices besides Bisutun imply another, unsubjugated world beyond the empire's borders. This is equivalent to calling out a pillar of Achaemenid ideology: Herodotus takes up the challenge.

[40] This approach follows Klinkott 2023: 72–106.

[41] Rollinger 2023b on the universalistic posture of Teispid-Achaemenid Persian imperialism.

[42] Gehler and Rollinger 2022.

[43] Recent scholarship includes Burbank and Cooper 2011; Rollinger and Gehler 2014; Gehler et al. 2020; Bang et al. 2021; Gehler and Rollinger 2022; Gehler et al. 2023; De Martino 2022a.

[44] Jacobs and Rollinger 2021; Radner et al. 2023. Afro-Eurasian hyper-power: Strootman 2020: 132.

[45] Rollinger 2021c (empire and borderlands); Rollinger 2021b (*longue durée* perspective); Michałowski 2020 (imperial beginnings).

(or anyone) 'beyond' the map or for any blank spot on it.[46] The world, at least in the closed discursive universe of Achaemenid inscriptions, ends with the empire; the two concepts are made coterminous.[47] Mesopotamian kingship traditions and Near Eastern conceptual geographies provide the intellectual background of the Achaemenid understanding of space.[48] However, the disproportionate size of Cyrus II's empire provided this 'cosmological bluster' with an unprecedented authority, grounded in the materiality of conquest. The appeal of such a world-view – and of the narratives used to underpin it – is shown by its longevity.[49] It was, in fact, adopted (and adapted) across Afro-Eurasia, from Alexander to the Sasanids and beyond.[50] An imperial subject himself, it is difficult to argue that Herodotus was unaware of, or chose to ignore, such imperial geographies and the all-encompassing philosophy of history they underpinned.[51] Indeed, there is evidence that he repeatedly engaged with both.[52] Imperial expansionism – and its ethical, cosmological and arguably even religious implications – is a red thread that runs through his work.[53] This is especially clear in the *Histories*' grand finale, where Cyrus once again is given narrative centre stage.[54]

The following sections build on these trends in Herodotean, Achaemenid and broader imperial scholarship to explore the strategies through which the historian systematically attempted to undermine Persian pretensions to (re)write the past and imagine the future. The *Histories* pursue this goal by narrating a succession of military failures suffered by the Great Kings. Special attention is devoted to the Achaemenid Empire's borderlands, which in their official representation (and thus in the historical understanding they set out to promote among Achaemenid subjects and elites) played such a capital role. Evidence will be presented to support the argument that none of the expeditions mentioned by Herodotus can be considered, at least in the broadest terms, purely the product of the author's imagination. This is because, by virtue of the enormous symbolic and ideological capital at play, it would have been unthinkable for Cyrus or any of his successors simply to boast of campaigns that never happened. Indeed, how convincingly a Persian king could establish himself as a worthy successor of the imperial founder and of his direct predecessor depended in no small measure on the actual waging of this territory-expanding enterprise.[55] It is precisely by virtue of this unavoidable historical background and the relative ideological constraints

[46] Degen 2024a.

[47] Claiming 'intentional geography' as a Seleucid invention, Kosmin 2014: 31–76 forgets the Achaemenid precedent altogether. Degen 2024b demonstrates the importance of the ancient Near Eastern context to understanding later imperial mental mapping.

[48] Neo-Assyrian precedent: Liverani 2017; Lanfranchi 2021; Novotny 2023.

[49] Rollinger and Bichler 2017; Rollinger and Degen 2021a; Degen 2021; Degen 2022a: 332–401. See Scott 2009: 34 on 'cosmological blusters'. Herodotus 'engaged in an Achaemenid intellectual environment' (Blankenship 2022: 80 on Hdt. 7.60–99).

[50] Degen forthcoming (b).

[51] Lincoln 2012: 59–88 on Achaemenid imperialism, cosmology and religion. See Bennison 2021 for a world-historical perspective.

[52] Degen 2022d: 535–40.

[53] Rollinger 2021d.

[54] Hdt. 9.122.2–3 and Irwin 2018.

[55] Hyland forthcoming.

that Herodotus' debunking takes on a potentially devastating spin and makes it much more than a simple polished essay in intertextual virtuosity.[56]

Thinking big(ger): Cyrus, Tomyris and the 'primal scene' of empire

In ancient Near Eastern thought, the trope of lurking enemies from the East who need to be subdued by (divinely appointed) kings is as old as the concept of empire itself.[57] Two ethnonyms, Gutium and Lullubum (and occasionally Simurrum), provide the first evidence of this.[58] Hard to pin down geographically, these were useful ethnic labels used by emerging Mesopotamian powers to denote inhabitants of semi-desert steppes or mountain ranges.[59] This imperial ethnography in the making served as a rhetorical device (an intellectual precondition) to assert authority over spaces that Near Eastern rulers coveted but could not control.[60] Claiming conquest of people lingering beyond the imperial borderlands soon became a staple of Mesopotamian kingship.[61] To boast of such an achievement implied having reached, concretely and metaphorically, the limits of the universe. This was a feat worthy only of gods and heroes, such as Gilgameš or Utnapištim.[62] It was a powerful ideological claim to be deployed in the highly competitive context of political entities and dynasties fighting each other for relatively limited space and precarious resources.[63] Unsurprisingly, the emergence, consolidation and tumultuous expansion of the Neo-Assyrian Empire impacted the mental geographies of Near Eastern dynasties by emphasizing its martial subtext even more.[64] Increasingly ambitious conquests changed the coordinates of these spatial politics (by constantly shifting the bar of what was considered a successful performance of royal authority one step higher). The underlying intellectual structures, however, remained intact. The enemies of the Mesopotamian rulers of old had almost all been turned into subjects. But the new masters of the world needed to present themselves to their audiences in the same terms as their predecessors (victorious at the edges of the map). The continually growing Assyrian dominions, however, set the enterprise on an infinitely larger scale.[65] Thus, far from disappearing after being vanquished, the Gutium, Lullubum and Simurrum moved further east, beyond the mountains, into the territories of the Iranian plateau controlled by the *bēl ālāni* of Media.[66] In the extant sources,

[56] Cf. Irwin 2014: 57–68; Ruffing 2016 (Herodotus and Athenian imperialism).
[57] Foster 2016.
[58] De Graef 2022.
[59] Lanfranchi 2023.
[60] Scott 2009: 98–127; Richardson 2012.
[61] The alleged barbarians quickly picked up such devices of imperial self-styling: Annubanini of Lullubum in the eighteenth century BC (De Graef 2022: 439–42) had himself engraved in a rock relief at Sar-e Pol-e Ẕahāb (Kermānšāh province) triumphing over six opponents according to a pattern that is still clearly detectable at Bisutun. See Scott 2009: 238–82 for a constructivist approach to similar dynamics of ethnogenesis in upland Southeast Asia.
[62] Haubold 2012.
[63] Steinkeller 2021; Garfinkle 2022.
[64] Shibata 2023, Fales 2023.
[65] Osborne 2021: 126–64 on the Anatolian borderlands of Assyria.
[66] See most recently Daryaee 2024.

they became 'the scourge of god': *Ummān-Manda*.[67] This intellectual background is crucial to contextualizing the genesis of Persian imperial ideology and the Teispid-Achaemenid historical tradition as it emerged from the time of Cyrus.[68]

The first millennium BC is a pivotal era in the history of the Near East. The rivalry between Elam and Assyria deserves emphasis here. Despite a military disaster and the ensuing sack of Susa, the engagement of Elam with Assyrian expansionism in the Zagros proved instrumental in shaping both the socio-political identity and the ideological repertoire of Elamite elites. These processes peaked around the mid-sixth century BC in the Persian ethnogenesis and Persia's subsequent unprecedented imperial expansion.[69] A key element to understanding the formation of Persian spatial thinking as an instrument of empire is the epithet 'expander of the realm', which is attested in royal inscriptions of the (late) Neo-Elamite period.[70] This concept is not alien to the Elamite tradition of royalty, as it was forged in the dialectic between highlands and lowlands so distinctive of the indigenous *longue durée* across the Iranian plateau. At the same time, it also betrays the unmistakable background noise of the agonistic confrontation with Assyrian power. That Neo-Elamite elites were conversant in the language and ideology of kingship of their neighbour is not surprising, given that high-ranking members of the local aristocracy spent time as hostages at the Neo-Assyrian court.[71] Significantly, among them was a certain Arukku, perhaps the uncle of Cyrus the Great.[72]

Herodotus' account of Cyrus' campaign against Tomyris, queen of the Central Asian Massagetai, acquires underappreciated layers of meaning when considered against this background.[73] Allegedly the most violent battle ever fought among barbarians (Hdt. 1.214.1), the newly minted 'king of the four quarters of the world' not only suffered a crushing defeat but died on the battlefield.[74] Herodotus clearly assigned this momentous event a critical role in his work, arguably emphasized by the gory detail of the king's beheading at the enemy's hand (1.214.4–5).[75] Cyrus' expedition is, however, only the first of a long list of ambitious

[67] Adalı 2011; Rollinger 2020; Rollinger 2021a; Fuchs 2023.

[68] Waters 2022a: 108–56.

[69] See Radner 2013 and Waters 2013 on Assyria and Elam; Gorris and Wicks 2018 and Bartelmus 2023 on the Neo-Elamite kingdom (Waters 2022b on its imperial features); Gorris 2020 for a treatment of Elam's last decades and resilience until the expansion of Cyrus' dominions in south-western Iran; Waters 2023 on the Persian imperial ethnogenesis; Basello 2023 on Elam and Persia under the empire.

[70] de Miroschedji 1985: 296–9; Henkelman 2003: 82–5; Álvarez-Mon 2018: 619; Gorris 2020: 60–109; Nielsen 2023: 555–6.

[71] Waters 2022c: 253–60.

[72] Waters 2022a: 1–31; Waters 2023: 389–91.

[73] Minardi 2023: 810–20.

[74] Cyr. Cyl. 20–2 (Schaudig 2001: 555). Hdt. 1.201–214 for the campaign account. See Bichler 2021 on the legacy of Herodotus' recorded version down to the Christian era. Briant 1996: 49–50 reviews the sources and the geopolitics of the area before Cyrus' expedition but does not attempt to clarify the background or the internal logic of Herodotus' (or any other source's) account.

[75] Bodily mutilation was a hallmark of, among others, individuals unworthy of kingship in the Near Eastern world, as Darius makes clear in the Bisutun account. Herodotus shows through his work that he is aware of the social meanings of violence in Achaemenid thought (Degen

campaigns waged by the Great Kings at the limits of their domains, each of which ended in disaster. The very narrative arrangement of the *Histories* thus casts a gloomy light on the ideological premises of the Persian imperial experience and its promise of happiness for all its potential subjects and agents. Notably, Cyrus' death generated considerable interest across the empire – arguably a clue to the place such an event occupied in the self-understanding of its ruling class. This is reflected in the numerous traditions spun around the king's demise (some of which are impossible to reconcile with the one Herodotus chose to retell among the many he knew). Yet the epilogue of the Cyrus *logos* has received comparatively little scholarly attention. From How and Wells onwards, commentators have consistently dismissed it as devoid of historical value. At best, the story is taken as a moralistic tale of hubris punished along the same lines as Croesus' ill-advised and ill-fated move across the Halys.[76]

Against the ideological background discussed above, however, it is clear that much more is at stake. Herodotus is consciously appropriating foundational tropes of Near Eastern kingship (particularly the idea of the conquering ruler at the edge of the earth) with the intention of subverting them and hence crafting a new history of Persian imperialism. The ending of Book 1 of the *Histories* transforms what was originally conceived (and disseminated) as a celebration of an unprecedented triumph into a parody of itself. A tale of victory becomes an exercise in debunking the ontological foundations of Persian imperial rhetoric. In the process, the dynasty's very own memorialization of its past, as well as its understanding of the empire's future, is dealt a devastating blow.[77]

Why did Herodotus specifically single out the version of events he recorded at the end of his first book? By his own admission, multiple versions of Cyrus' death existed,[78] and he claims to have selected the most credible (1.214.5). Clearly, even on Central Asian matters, Herodotus knew much more than he reports.[79]

2020; Benson 2019 on violence as a tool of statecraft under Darius): his account of Cyrus' death arguably plays on these semantics to stress the king's dramatic downfall from power and (godly) grace.

[76] Note Xen. *Cyr.* 7.7, whose flattering portrait of the empire's founder could not have ended with a humiliating defeat (and gruesome treatment at the hands of a – female – barbarian warrior) somewhere in the wild steppes. The same can be said for Ctesias (Bichler 2011 on his agonistic attitude towards Herodotus). Kuhrt 2007: 99–101 for an annotated translation of the episode (a 'moralizing tale': cf. Dewald and Munson 2022: 462–3). According to Asheri 1988: 381, Herodotus' narrative has almost no historical value. A similar conclusion is reached in Asheri et al. 2007: 212.

[77] 'Imperial trauma': Rollinger and Degen 2021b: 213. See Kuhrt 2021 on the empire's expansion under Cyrus and Cambyses. The exact location of the campaign cannot be ascertained. Still, its historicity and Central Asian settings are validated by the underlying logic of the ideological trope of waging war at the ends of the (known) world.

[78] Mitchell 2023: 126–52.

[79] A forthcoming paper by Stefan Härtel, whom I thank for sharing an early draft, discusses the evidence for Herodotus' wilful omission of material for a Bactrian *logos* which he anticipates several times throughout the work, but never delivers. This is suggested, for example, at 1.153.4: 'he [Cyrus] had Babylon in his way and the Bactrian people, and the Sakā and Egyptians, determined to lead the armies against them himself'. As Härtel notes, this comes immeditately after a Lydian and Median *logos*. The Babylonian *logos* follows after the conquest of Asia Minor, and the Egyptians are the subject of Book 2, while the Sakā are dealt

His treatment of Cyrus' demise underwent a process of conscious selection. This leads one to ask in whose eyes the version Herodotus decided to report was the most trustworthy – or most meaningful. It is, in other words, a matter of the story's social surface. Herodotus' references to local sources have been examined since Jacoby.[80] In the last two decades, important insights have been provided by Nino Luraghi and Maurizio Giangiulio. As they argue, whenever Herodotus attributes an indigenous background to (at least partially) oral traditions, for example regarding a community's origins, he does so to substantiate the originality of his research method as presented in the opening of the *Histories*.[81] It is true that no local source is explicitly named in the case of Cyrus' death. However, Herodotus' stressing that he presented the most credible among those he knew suggests that, in his judgement, this was the account with the strongest purchase among the Persians (and thus across the empire). Why? One possible answer is that such an account was originally conceived to celebrate Cyrus' expansion of the empire to new, hitherto unknown frontiers. In doing so, Herodotus was following, for once, the demonstrably (trans) local, imperial knowledge with which Cyrus himself and his network of advisors, scribes and administrators were intimately familiar. Herodotus first selected a story he knew reflected the version of the past that the Teispid dynasty had chosen as worthy of remembrance – in other words, this may have been the first recorded (by a Greek?) snippet of Persian social (imperial) memory. Then, he turned it upside down and crafted an account of arrogance, miscalculation, defeat and humiliation. Finally, he presented (t)his version of events as the most authoritative of all the existing variants: indeed, the only one derived from local sources of knowledge.[82]

Three strands of evidence may support this argument. First is Herodotus' description of Tomyris' Massagetai and their geography. According to the historian, they were known to Cyrus as a large and bellicose population, settled to the east of the Great King's domains (1.201.1). With the conquest of the Medes, even the *Ummān-Manda* had been subdued by the fledgling imperial power. The map was filling up at breathtaking speed, and the world was shrinking.[83] Nevertheless, the

with at length in Book 4 and at the end of Cyrus' story. Nothing more, however, is said about the Bactrians.

[80] Giangiulio 2020: 287–9; Proietti 2023: 16–17.

[81] Luraghi 2001.

[82] Interestingly, at 1.95.1, Herodotus tells the story of Cyrus 'guided by *some* of the Persians who do not want to aggrandize him, but to tell the truth'. Who these Persians are is not mentioned. Cyrus' court is unlikely to be the social environment on whose knowledge he draws, as the story Herodotus tells of the king's campaign (and death) runs squarely against what, I argue here, the 'official' Teispid narrative meant to convey. Might the emphasis on the 'truthful nature' of his Persian informants be a tongue-in-cheek reference to Darius and his (doubtful, as 3.72.4 demonstrates) claim in the Bisutun Inscription to tell nothing but the truth about his rise to power? As argued by Irwin 2023: 85, Herodotus was aware of 'the power of power – especially imperial power – to influence narratives of the past and what can even be known about it'. In Egypt, primary evidence suggests that Darius may have been responsible for shaping a negative reception of Cambyses' tenure as king (Schütze 2023a: 208–16). Herodotus' allusion to different, and potentially conflicting, Persian sources on Cyrus' life may indicate that similar dynamics were at work in Central Asia.

[83] See Waters 2010 on Cyrus and the Medes. Beckwith 2023: 82–9 forcefully (but, given his neglect of Cyrus' Elamite background, unconvincingly) claims that the Medes provided Cyrus with dynastic claims from the Median kings' Scythian (which, according to him, has the

authority of previous Near Eastern imperial geographies and cosmologies that linked, in the words of Seth Richardson, imperial 'validity' to the conquest of distant eastern (or western) enemies required engagement with an actual or alleged foe.[84] In the worst-case scenario, it might even have compelled the social construction of such an enemy.[85] Expansion into eastern Iran and Central Asia thus provided the perfect opportunity to stage yet another (ideally the last?) frontier intervention.[86]

A second clue in Herodotus' account supports the argument presented here. Paramount among the reasons prompting the conqueror to move against the Massagetai was the fact that, up to that point, Cyrus had demonstrated that no one could oppose his armies when he led them into battle (1.204.2). Translated into the agonistic ancient Near Eastern language of power and royal competition, the conquest of the Central Asian peoples was envisaged by the new King of the World as critical to his and his empire's self-representation. The capacity to wage a victorious war against an eastern foe such as the Massagetai made it possible to present Cyrus as another successful 'expander of the realm'. With such a feat, he was able to outshine all his royal ancestors in Elam (Anšan), and even the mighty Neo-Assyrian kings. Additionally, he was presenting his credentials as an unvanquished conqueror, and thus authoritative monarch, *vis-à-vis* the new imperial elite.[87] History and memory, both past and present, weighed considerably on Cyrus' actions.[88]

The third piece of evidence in Herodotus' narrative is at once the most important and the least conspicuous. It is the mention of Cyrus' intent to cross the Araxes in arms and of his preparations to do so. The river marks his border with Massagetai territory in the *Histories*' geography (1.205.2). Attempts to locate this waterway have given rise to intense debate.[89] Greek and Roman authors'

etymological meaning 'royal') lineage.

[84] See Richardson 2020 on the methodological pitfalls of 'legitimacy' as an explanatory concept and the case for turning to issues of (narrative) 'validity'.

[85] Compare the dynamics of Tsarist expansion in Central Asia in the nineteenth century (Morrison 2021: 1–52). Prestige, or the Russian imperial elite's need to present themselves to their peers across Europe as worthy of their rank, often played a role more important than any economic or strategic consideration in fuelling costly and sometimes disastrous campaigns south of Orenburg.

[86] Goršenina 2014: 133–60. European travellers to Central Asia came to the region with considerable intellectual background, which included Herodotus' and other Greek and Roman sources' depiction of mirabilia such as monsters and semi-human beings (Degen 2022d for the Near Eastern roots of this teratography). Predictably, as European exploration went on, nothing of the kind was found; undeterred cartographers and travel writers shifted those creatures, which had to exist somewhere, further east, where the map was still blank. As a result, early missionaries to Tibet in the seventeenth century sneaked into the roof of the world still looking for one-eyed and dog-headed men, which Herodotus had placed in Scythia or somewhere beyond the Nubian Desert; see Bellini 2015: 329–70.

[87] Lanfranchi and Rollinger 2021: 61–2 on power projection beyond imperial territory and intra-imperial competition (between local power-brokers to advance their careers, between royal family members or even between the king and influential courtiers).

[88] See Waters 2023: 393–6 on Cyrus' conquest of Media, arguably the first time he started to grapple with the implications of the Neo-Assyrian precedent of conquest – or claims of victory – across the Iranian plateau.

[89] Asheri 1988: 381 and Dewald and Munson 2022: 79, equating the river with the modern Volga.

shaky notions of Central Asian geography are well known. As many scholars have suggested, it cannot be ruled out that Herodotus confused Sogdian hydrography (or Khwarazmian, should one focus on Cyrus' campaign south of the Aral Sea, at the delta of either the Amudaryo or the Syrdaryo) with that of the Caucasus or the south-western Caspian.[90] Alternatively, one might suspect an intent on Herodotus' part to foreshadow the account of the origins of another Scythian campaign (Darius') that opens Book 4, with its dubious claim that the Scythians had enjoyed a twenty-eight-year hegemony over the whole of Asia (4.1.1–3).[91] Herodotus' receptivity to the 'succession of empires' schema strengthens this argument.[92] Of venerable Near Eastern tradition, this framework becomes a cornerstone of the *Histories*' chronological ordering of events and of Herodotus' explanation of Persia's rise to power.[93]

What matters most here is the explicit reference to Cyrus' willingness to cross a (massive and notoriously treacherous) waterway to penetrate Scythian territory, and his impressive preparations.[94] The theme of crossing bodies of water employing sophisticated technological means is a constant in the self-representation of Near Eastern (particularly Neo-Assyrian) kings.[95] Moreover, the competitive – and necessarily victorious – confrontation of these rulers with natural barriers such as rivers or mountains figures repeatedly in royal inscriptions and annals as a metaphor *par excellence* for the conquest of universal rule.[96]

Taken together, the above supports the hypothesis that Herodotus' account of Cyrus' expedition to Central Asia developed in a dialectical relationship with a coherent version developed around Cyrus' court, if not at the command of the Great King himself. The historian was aware, at very least, of its essential components, and, as far as the extant evidence goes, he appears to have been the first to systematically turn them on their head. At any rate, if this inversion occurred prior to Herodotus' reception of it, he clearly understood its implications and capitalized upon them. The campaign against the Massagetai thus emerges as part of a Persian historical tradition: a cohesive and ideologically oriented recording of the past. Considering its intellectual precedents, the ultimate goal of such a tradition appears to have been to present the heir of the kings of Anšan as the new universal ruler. Cyrus' triumphs in the alleged wastelands of Scythia placed him above any precedent, historical or mythical, of which memory was

[90] Dewald and Munson 2022: 462–3. See Rapin 2001 on Central Asian geography in the Greek and Latin sources.

[91] On the question of alleged Scythian hegemony in south-west Asia, with further literature, cf. Adalı 2017 for a recent assessment of the historical background from an Assyrian perspective.

[92] Oellig 2023: 288–350.

[93] If so, this would confirm yet again Herodotus' fluency in ancient Near Eastern intellectual engagement with the past. Cf. Degen 2022d: 529–30: Herodotus' Araxes reflects Mesopotamian mental mapping of the *marratu*, the body of water encompassing the whole world. This is a discourse hinged on ideology, not physical geography.

[94] Peterson 2019: 39–50 on the hydrology of Central Asian rivers and the difficulty of mastering their courses.

[95] Rollinger 2013a.

[96] Rollinger 2014a; Degen 2022: 363–81 on the Achaemenid background of Alexander's river crossing, his (in)famous march through the Gedrosian Desert and his conquest of impervious fortresses in (and on the peaks of) impassable mountains.

preserved. New, more remote and more dangerous *Ummān-Manda* were required for a new, mightier world conqueror.[97]

This background provides vital context for the cultural and historical meaning attributed by imperial tradition-formers to the establishment of a settlement such as Cyropolis while Cyrus campaigned in Central Asia.[98] Famously, Strabo presents Cyropolis as the last bulwark of Persian power against threats from the steppes. The account in the *Geography* obviously reflects ethnocultural spatial perceptions of the steppes characteristic of the Mediterranean world and the traditions of geo-ethnographical writing familiar to Strabo.[99] It is doubtful that the Persian 'ethnoclass' viewed that space and its people through the same lens.[100] Instead, the evidence discussed so far makes it much more likely that Cyropolis' establishment was meant by its founder as an overt act of territorial appropriation within a space located beyond the range – even the mental horizons – of any of Cyrus' predecessors within and beyond the kingdom of Anšan, and that it was supposed to be understood in this way by his imperial subjects and those in the territories he thus claimed.[101] In the new geography of the empire, an imperial foundation of this magnitude served the purpose of advertising the final subjugation of the Gutians (or their Central Asian proxies). If so, the rather unflattering ethnography of the Massagetai inserted by Herodotus at the end of his account of Cyrus' expedition might be taken to reflect the Persian social construction of a new eastern foe, a final, monstrous enemy to be subdued by the king to reaffirm order and justice over chaos.[102] From the Assyrians down to Xerxes, this is a cornerstone of ancient

[97] Llewellyn-Jones 2022: 82 describes Cyrus' campaign in Central Asia as 'an overreaction ... to what was merely cattle-rustling', and goes on to comment that 'it is hard to justify Cyrus' bellicose attitude towards the Massagetai or to see him as anything other than an aggressor in his mission to bring them to heel'. Whatever their eventual outcome, Cyrus' actions in the East were thoroughly embedded in his (and his subjects') cultural framework, and Herodotus knew that. This awareness gives his account its sharpness as a demystification of Teispid imperial ambitions.

[98] See Cohen 2013: 254 on possible locations around the modern Tajik town of Xuçand (Хуҷанд, former Leninābād). Cf. Arr. *Anab.* 4.3.1–4; Briant 2021: 55–6.

[99] On literary traditions of 'Othering' in the Graeco-Roman world, see now Forsén and Lampinen 2024.

[100] Strabo 11.11.4.

[101] Beckwith 2009: 1–77 discusses the social world of Central Eurasian (steppe) peoples and how it impacted their understanding of the space surrounding them and their neighbours. Scott 2017: 219–56 calls into question the narratives of non-sedentary peoples, steppe inhabitants and/or mountain dwellers as impoverished and, therefore, warlike 'barbarians', stressing the cultural rather than utilitarian dimension of non-industrial economies and landscape use.

[102] Adalı 2011: 28. See Hdt. 1.215–16 on the ethnography of the steppe peoples in Central Asia and Herodotean ethnography throughout the *Histories*; see also Skinner 2018. Immerwahr 1966: 148–88 points out that ethnography in the *Histories* is inextricably bound to historical inquiry. The logic of Cyrus' campaign, therefore, provides the foil against which the presentation of the Massagetai unfolds. It is open to debate whether a passage such as 1.134.2, in which Herodotus claims that the Persians most value those closest to them is not (only) a product of Greek-informed environmental determinism (Thomas 2000: 102–34) but also a rephrasing in cultural categories more familiar to the audience (and readership) of the *Histories* of Achaemenid anthropology and mental mapping that came at least to some extent from the mythical geography transmitted in the – extant – Old *Avestā* (Skjærvø 1999; Grenet 2005).

Near Eastern understanding of the historical purpose of empire.[103] Accordingly, Herodotus' Scythians are presented as a textbook example of what a barbarian looks like – not, as argued by François Hartog, because of their role as a mirror of Greek self-perception.[104] In fact, they reflect Herodotus' reception of the motif of the eastern enemy embedded in Cyrus' own memorialization of his campaign in Central Asia.[105] It seems significant, therefore, that Herodotus makes no mention whatsoever of Cyrus' settlement construction in the far east. It is hard to argue that he did not know about it, because Cyropolis served as a benchmark for Alexander's historians by which to measure the excellence of the Macedonian king in that he conquered and built cities beyond the reach of Cyrus' power.[106] Mentions of Cyrus' legacy in Central Asia in the works of authors such as Arrian and Curtius repurpose Achaemenid 'official language' originally meant to exalt the king to suit their heroization of Alexander.[107] As such, they reflect older, 'inherited geographies' of power which served the Persians' narrative of their history as imperial masters. Herodotus' silence, therefore, appears intentional. His glossing over of what was still understood within and beyond the Achaemenid domains more than a century later as one of Cyrus' greatest achievements served in the narrative of the *Histories* the same function as it does in Near Eastern royal accounts of defeated enemies. It is an act of manipulating the past: intentional history. In any case, it was impossible to avoid the fact that Cyrus died in Central Asia. The magnitude of the event was such that it immediately became a pivotal moment in the Achaemenid Empire's cultural memory, a fact that Cyrus' heirs had no choice but to reckon with.[108] Silenced in the memorial tradition(s) fostered by the dynasty (remember that several accounts of Cyrus death were circulating in the early fifth century), the Central Asian catastrophe instead becomes the keystone of the Cyrus *logos* in Herodotus, in a sharp and sophisticated counterbalancing of the legend around his origins and unstoppable, divinely sanctioned rise to universal power (1.107–22).

It is possible at this point to draw some preliminary conclusions. The end of *Histories* Book 1 illustrates Herodotus' critical stance on a coherent and structured strategy of tradition-making originating in Persia. The Great King and his court

[103] Degen 2024a: 47–50.

[104] See now Skinner 2024 on Greek stereotypes as a tool of identity formation in the Archaic and early Classical periods.

[105] See Hartog 1980 on the Greek mirror and Kim 2009 for a compelling comparison between ancient Greek and imperial (Han) Chinese ethnographies.

[106] Cohen 2013: 252–5. In Arrian, the destruction of Cyrus' settlements in Central Asia is meant to convey Alexander's triumph over the empire's founder. Following Degen 2022c, Arrian's presentation of events might be understood as reflecting Alexander's own 'official language', which meant the artful creation of a discourse on kingship and (universal) rule which was consciously set against the paradigm established by the Achaemenid kings. Within this framework, the outsized role of Cyropolis suggests that its importance for the Persian geography of power was well understood at least by the imperial intellectual and political elites (one of the many targets of any imperial 'official language' throughout world history), to which Herodotus obviously belonged. His silence on such a relevant topic is, therefore, intriguing.

[107] Degen 2022c.

[108] For the legacy of this event in later Achaemenid social (especially dynastic) memory, see the next section.

elaborated and fostered an ideologically charged version of the past for the consumption of an audience that was broader and more socially and culturally diverse than ever as a result of unprecedented imperial expansion. This becomes evident when Herodotus' account of Cyrus' death is examined against Near Eastern conceptualizations of kingship and universal rule.[109]

The story of Cambyses' expedition against Ethiopia, another key passage in Herodotus' archaeology of Persian imperialism, offers further insights. The tragic reversal that closes Book 1 does not stand in isolation.[110] On the contrary, it emerges as *the* pivotal moment in the historical trajectory of Persia and its rulers, at least according to Herodotus' take on the Teispid-Achaemenid philosophy of (imperial) history.[111]

Wretched Kūš: a king beyond the desert

Herodotus gave Cambyses a terrible press. In his *logos*, Cyrus' heir is repeatedly presented as the polar opposite of his father (1.114–17). The result is a narrative portraying the second Persian king as a desecrator of tombs (that of Amasis, the late Egyptian pharaoh who had dared stand up to him) and a violator of the most sacred local traditions (the Apis bull). In a typical narrative turn, Herodotus remarks that the gravity of such conduct would only become apparent at the end of the Great King's life.[112] A good deal of sadistic cruelty meted out on close family members and courtiers alike (culminating in Sisamnes' flaying) rounds off the picture.[113] It is little surprise then that, according to the *Histories*' summary of the Achaemenid Empire's early rulers, the Persians called Cambyses a tyrant (3.89.3).[114] The king's ambitious expansionist plans to the west and the south ended in disaster. It follows, Herodotus remarks, that Cambyses must have been insane, for only mental illness could explain such behaviour.[115]

Scholars have repeatedly highlighted the tendentiousness of such a caricatured portrayal.[116] The conquest of Egypt was a tremendous success for Cambyses, as it had defied the capabilities of more than one of his Near Eastern

[109] Khatchadourian 2016: xxxi.

[110] As recently demonstrated by Irwin (2023: 68–77), Cambyses' death in Hdt. 3.64–5 provides another case in point.

[111] 'Primal scene' (*Urszene*): Freud 1947. See Griffin 2007 on Herodotus and tragedy.

[112] See Hdt. 3.16 on Amasis' mummy, 3.27–9 for the Apis story and 3.64 for Cambyses' delayed punishment for his impiety.

[113] Hdt. 3.32 (sister's murder), 3.34–6 (courtly abuses), 5.25 (Sisamnes' execution). See Rollinger 2010: 568 on the gory violence committed by Persian Great Kings in the *Histories*.

[114] Herodotus also claims, in contrast, that they called Cyrus 'a father'. In light of the account of Cyrus' life (and death), this reference to alleged Persian cultural memory may have ironic overtones.

[115] Hdt. 3.25.1 (not by chance at the outset of the Ethiopian campaign's account), 3.35, 3.38. See Bonifazi 2023 on Herodotus' verbal strategies to portray Cambyses' insanity.

[116] Briant 1996: 66–8. Konstantakos 2016 discusses the Apis story. Rollinger 2010: 609–22 explores Herodotus' decontextualization of attested ancient Near Eastern practices of corporal punishment to shape his portrait of a frenzied tyrant. This is perhaps most evident in the Sisamnes story: Degen 2020.

predecessors, including Cyrus.[117] The enlargement of the empire unquestionably marked the new ruler as a worthy heir to his father's deeds. That Cambyses also succeeded in projecting power further by allying himself with local power brokers in the Eastern Delta and the North Arabian Desert – according to Herodotus himself a key factor in the conquest – only added to the new king's glory.[118] It is paramount never to lose sight of the long shadow cast over Cambyses by Cyrus' legacy as the (then) unsurpassed enlarger of the Persian domains, in accordance both with the model of Mesopotamian kingship and the dynasty's Elamite background. This includes his coronation as the designated successor in Babylon, wearing an Elamite robe, both signs that he was being groomed for kingship by exposure to the underlining principle of universal rulership mentioned above.[119] There are two fundamental reasons for this.

First, it becomes easier to make sense of the new Great King's subsequent expansionist plans, which Herodotus once again tendentiously presents as a series of insanities destined to end in one disaster after another.[120] Moreover, framing what is known of Cambyses' actions within a model of (sacred and intergenerationally competitive) kingship provides a coherent interpretative framework to account for the absence in the surviving sources of any reference whatsoever to his military activities in Central Asia. The same is true also for Cambyses' brother Bardiya, who was apparently given remarkable agency in the East by his father.[121] On the one hand, it seems that the imperial trauma of Cyrus' death called for actions sufficiently dramatic to reinvigorate the image of Persian imperialism as divinely ordained and the kings as invincible.[122] On the other hand, it discouraged a direct confrontation on the same terrain on which his father had failed (perhaps to avoid a similar outcome?). Hence Cambyses' decision to measure himself against Cyrus in a setting that was distant enough geographically to avoid embarrassing

[117] Tuplin 2018a; Degen 2022d: 529.

[118] Cf. Hdt. 3.4–9 for Cambyses' diplomatic work in Arabia (Spersverlage 2023 on its archaeology). See Tebes 2023: 241–4 on the Syro-northern Arabian social organization during the centuries leading up to Persian encroachment in the region. See Colburn 2020a: 207–8 on the distribution of luxury goods such as silver vessels as a major strategy of Persian expansionism in (late) Saite Egypt. According to Briant 1996: 56–60, the expedition might have already been planned under Cyrus. If true, this gave Cambyses a compelling opportunity to prove himself equal to his father's military prowess. See Ruzicka 2012: 14–25 on the expedition's historical context.

[119] See Cyr. Cyl. 35 for the blessing formula mentioning Cyrus and Cambyses together; Waters 2023: 402–3 on Cambyses in Babylon while Cyrus was still alive.

[120] Briant 1996: 65–6 cautioned against accepting Herodotus' presentation of the Libyan and the Nubian expeditions. Burstein 2022: 699–700 observes that, at the time of Herodotus' writing, Egyptian sentiments regarding Cambyses were already sour, which would account for the damning version of events Herodotus reported. However, this leaves unanswered the question of the social surface of such tales, namely the context of the origin and circulation of Cambyses' black legend, which is unlikely to have been shared by every Egyptian in the form preserved. See Vansina 1985: 19–21 on the formation and spread of group memory.

[121] Waters 2023: 406–8.

[122] Compare the death of Sargon II (705 BC, on the battlefield in the empire's borderlands) and how significantly it impacted the traction of (Neo-)Assyrian narratives of their empire's purpose: Frahm 2023: 177–90.

associations with the Central Asian defeat but no less charged with symbolic significance.[123]

The choice of the Libyan Desert and the Siwa Oasis in the far west is indicative of Cambyses' intentions. This is because of the ideological relevance, in ancient Near Eastern narratives on kingship, of the subjugation of territories located 'on this side of the desert and on that side of the desert'.[124] Such a standpoint is equally relevant in the case of Nubia, not least because of the southern territories' political, economic and cultural significance in the Egyptian context.[125] Faced with the instability of the Saite dynasty's control of the southern borderlands around the second cataract (and further upstream), a victorious campaign at those latitudes could be successfully marketed even within the framework of the pharaonic discourse of self-representation. Accordingly, it would have been doubly tempting for a ruler such as Cambyses in the early days of his tenure.[126] It seems no accident, then, that Darius later felt compelled to identify the southern limits of the domains subject to him (and thus of the entire universe) precisely with Nubia. Success on the ground granted ideological legitimacy and performative appeal, hence the endurance of this tradition of imperial geographies.[127] Literary and material evidence helps to reinforce the impression not only of the success of Cambyses' campaign(s?) in Nubia but also of the influence such military forays likely exerted in strengthening the Persian self-representation as a universal empire. This reinforced the understanding of Teispid-Achaemenid history as a manifest destiny of sorts, propelled by its rulers' military triumphs.[128]

Against such a backdrop, Diodorus Siculus' mention (1.34.7) of the introduction into Egypt of valuable fruit trees originating in Nubia – as part of a *paradeisos*, a garden and hunting ground of crucial significance in Persian aristocratic culture – is strong evidence of the importance attributed to Nubia's incorporation, at least symbolically, into the Achaemenid Empire's territories among the intellectual circles closest to Cambyses.[129]

[123] Graeber and Sahlins 2017: 444–6 on the strategy of 'outdoing' a prominent ancestor in some dramatic way (including a successful military campaign in a challenging environment) to counter a cumbersome legacy.

[124] Hdt. 3.25–6 with Agut-Labordère 2023b, on the Siwa campaign. Compare Darius' claim – on an inscription written in Akkadian (DPg) – that his power stretched as far as the desert called 'the Land of thirst' (*qaqqar ṣumāmītu:* Degen 2022a: 371 with references and discussion). See Kuhrt 2007: 483 for an English translation and Degen forthcoming (c) for extensive commentary on the desert as a frontier of ambition for Achaemenid imperial fantasies.

[125] See Hdt. 3.25 for the account of the expedition. For Egyptian attitudes towards Nubia, cf. Smith 2003: 56–96; Howley 2022.

[126] See Schütze 2023b: 31–3 on Psamtek II's campaigns against Nubia and Agut-Labordère 2023a: 743–6 on Nubia under the Achaemenids.

[127] DHa § 2.

[128] Strabo's claim (17.1.5) that Cambyses even reached Meroë might be doubted. However, considering Darius' extractive capacity just a few years later (of which he boasted vocally in DSf § 11; see Colburn 2021 on the material evidence suggesting the reach of Achaemenid power south of Elephantine), it cannot be doubted that Cambyses' bid for imperial expansion towards the African borderlands met with a remarkable degree of success.

[129] See Agut-Labordère 2023a: 745–6 for a more conservative approach; however, the discovery of a *rhyton* (a drinking vessel characteristic of Persian court culture) in the superstructure of a

How, though, should one interpret Herodotus' versions of the two campaigns? Recently, Elizabeth Irwin has suggested understanding the Egyptian *logos* of Cambyses as spurred by the growing Athenian activity in the Mediterranean in the 460s on the one hand and, on the other, as an introduction to the rise of Persia that forms the focus of Book 3.[130] However, this approach overlooks the densely woven web of references to the motif of borderland conquests as a stage for performative claims to universal rule, so central to both the self-representation of the Great Kings and their understanding of (imperial) historical development. Indeed, Herodotus' account of Cambyses' reign is marked by precisely this theme, not least in the context of the campaign against Nubia.[131]

Just as we have seen with Cyrus, in the case of Cambyses, Herodotus' account takes the form of an articulate and polemical response to an image that Cambyses had evidently gone to great trouble to construct, discursively and on the ground. Close analysis of his account also has implications for Herodotus' positioning as the *histor* of Persian imperialism, whose genesis and expansion represent a major thread of the *Histories*.

To this end, it is appropriate to start with the words Herodotus uses to frame Cambyses' expeditions in spatial terms. Cyrus' heir, he notes, was preparing to wage war 'at the ends of the earth' (ἐς τὰ ἔσχατα γῆς, 3.25.1). This is a rare turn of phrase in the *Histories*. It occurs in only one other context: the famous oracle of the Wooden Wall (7.141.3).[132] Attention has focused on the epic echoes of this formula. However, little interest has been expressed in its possible Near Eastern subtext.[133] Broadening the analytical gaze to include the Persian cultural context not only allows for better appreciation of the ideological poignancy of Cambyses' *logos*. It also provides support for the central argument of this article. Namely, that Herodotus intended to construct a counter-history of Persian imperial expansion, past, present and future, by unmasking the Great Kings' claims to worldwide dominion as vacuous bluster.

In the cases of Darius and Xerxes (on whom see further below), Herodotus' awareness of the importance to Achaemenid monarchs of presenting themselves as victorious conquerors of far-flung territories has already been shown. Within such an ideological construct, erecting celebratory monuments played a role of paramount importance. This performative act must have gained traction from

pyramid at Meroë (Török 2014: 26) suggests much more than 'some sort of elite exchange with the northern regions' (Agut-Labordère 2023a: 745). This suggestion is supported by the social implications of objects such as drinking vessels, as they were instrumental in entrenching Persian political and economic influence far outside the territories directly under the Great King's sway: Khatchadourian 2016: 127–41; Colburn 2020a: 189–220.

130 Irwin 2017: 116–30.

131 Rollinger 2021d.

132 Proietti 2021: 453–4.

133 Proietti 2013: 26 n. 16 for references. After Marathon, the syntagm becomes more popular (Proietti 2020a: 43; Proietti 2021: 293). Hence the question of whether Athenian policymakers could still understand the Persian background noise of claiming fame as far as the world's end and indeed whether they thought to counter imperial boasts with their own civic (and later hegemonic) self-glorifying memory. This would not be surprising considering the Athenian appropriation of other Persian 'instruments of empire' (Raaflaub 2009).

having some basis in fact, such as a military campaign like Cyrus' against the Massagetai.[134]

As pointed out by Robert Rollinger, the details of the Nubian expedition, which could too easily be dismissed as quirks typical of Greek teratology, suddenly stand out in all their significance, and regain their proper cultural (imperial) context.[135] For example: as the Ichthyophagoi sent by Cambyses to request submission from the Ethiopians reached their destination, the local king showed them a set of funerary monuments (Hdt. 3.24.2–3).[136] Rollinger's analysis of this seemingly irrelevant episode exposes the narrative function of these *stelai* (as Herodotus calls them): the *Histories* repurpose a Near Eastern architectural device to express domination, here inscribed monuments located in strategic border zones, into an (ominous) object of worship by unconquerable people living beyond the reach of imperial power.[137]

The fact that, according to Herodotus, the Egyptians were able to unmask Persian ambitions of world domination as unwarranted bluster is also suggestive of the imperial (specifically Teispid-Achaemenid) subtext of Cambyses' Ethiopian *logos*. The Egyptians succeeded in this by recourse to the memory of the legendary pharaoh Sesostris, who in the distant past had allegedly conquered more – and more distant – territories than any Great King, including Darius.[138] As detailed by Rollinger, this interpretation finds further backing when one considers the cultural significance of the bow with which the ruler of the Ethiopians reciprocated Cambyses' gifts and which granted control of Ethiopia only to the one who could wield it.[139] In two famous inscriptions of Darius and Xerxes, virtually identical in form and content, excellence in archery is a vital attribute of the Great King's self-presentation.[140] The Ethiopian ruler challenges Cambyses to shoot his bow as proof of his right to conquer the southern lands. In doing so, he implicitly questions the Persians' claim to his domains. Moreover, by questioning Cambyses' prowess as an archer, Herodotus' Ethiopian monarch exposes Cyrus' son as a king unworthy of his father and, consequently, of the imperial throne.[141]

[134] Rollinger 2014b; Rollinger 2021c. Allgaier 2022: 45–51 on Darius' inscriptions as both a monument to the king's military might and, critically, a marker of his excellence. Allgaier understands the episodes he investigates (Hdt. 4.87 and 4.91) as purely Herodotean literary creations intended to compare Herodotus' own work (a veritable κτῆμα ἐς αἰεί) to the king's misplaced ambitions. However, it makes much more sense to read these passages, and several others discussed here, as conscious engagement with actual monuments and with the overarching ideology (philosophy of history) behind them. Though the evidence remains elusive, what seems true for Darius likely held meaning for Cambyses and Cyrus as well.

[135] Rollinger 2021d: 197–9 for discussion and extensive bibliography.

[136] See Rollinger 2021d: 197.

[137] Rollinger 2021d: 198–9.

[138] Rollinger 2021d: 195–200; see Hdt. 2.110.1.

[139] Cf. Hdt. 3.21.2–3 with the analysis presented in Rollinger 2021d: 198. It is tempting to see an echo of *Od.* 10.17–22, with Cambyses cast as a (failed) epic hero. If so, this would be another instance of Herodotus' skilful blending of different layers of cultural meaning to address different audiences. Thanks to Alwyn Harrison for the suggestion.

[140] Cf. DNb § 2 (Kuhrt 2007: 505) and XPl § 9 (Schmitt 2009: 109).

[141] At least within the narrative context of the *Histories*, Cambyses clearly understood what was being talked about. Accordingly, he had his brother Bardiya executed precisely because of his capacity to draw that bow: Hdt. 3.30.1 with Rollinger 2021d: 198.

Several clues support the reading of Herodotus' narrative of Cambyses' campaign as an all-encompassing critique of Persian narratives of expansionism and rightful rule. First, there is the likelihood of previous attempts by Cyrus, which prompted Cambyses to seek to surpass his father and thus establish himself as a worthy heir. Secondly, it is possible to point to scattered yet coherent evidence of Cambyses' achievements in Egypt as well as further south and west, beyond what seems to have been the scope of Cyrus' (planned?) campaigns. Darius' later building activities and extensive agricultural programme in the desert only further support the impression of Cambyses' success in the area, as they are unlikely to have occurred in a vacuum.[142] However, the story does not end here.

Indeed, as with Cyrus, the way in which the account of the expedition unfolds suggests that the focus of Herodotus' text is a (scathingly) critical reassessment of a version of events that is likely to have originated in the context of Cambyses' court: another case of Persian reflection upon and presentation of the early imperial past. Similarly to Cyrus' death in Central Asia, the alleged catastrophe in Nubia thus served a double purpose in the narrative economy of the *Histories*. First, it demonstrates that, irrespective of Persian claims to the contrary, there remain lands beyond the reach of the Great Kings' ambition. Secondly, and more importantly, it makes clear that these spaces are inhabited by individuals willing and able to challenge such ambitions with good chances of success. Particularly overt in the cases of Darius and Xerxes, this narrative strategy is already fully developed in the account of Cambyses' reign.[143] The point here is not so much to attempt to reconstruct the historical reality behind the *stelai* that the Ichthyophagoi may have encountered in Ethiopia. What matters, rather, is to understand their role as a narrative device deployed by Herodotus to undermine Cambyses' attempts to establish a royal persona as 'expander of the realm'. In the intellectual universe of the *Histories*, the choice of precisely these objects is unlikely to be a matter of chance. On the contrary, it probably repurposed Persian stories of Cambyses' conquest circulating in Egypt which may have made reference to monuments celebrating the king's achievements, by entirely subverting their ideological meaning.

Herodotus' critical engagement with several competing traditions on Egypt can also be seen in his invocation of two versions – Egyptian and Persian – that justify Cambyses' campaign at the beginning of Book 3.[144] At first glance, these accounts are blatantly absurd. As such, they have commonly been understood as veiled references to the socio-political reality in which Herodotus wrote (which is often assumed to have been more Hellenocentric than it perhaps was).[145] This may, of course, be what they are. However, the syntax of the text should give us pause. The first account Herodotus provides ends with οὕτω μέν νυν λέγουσι Πέρσαι ('so the Persians say'), while the second opens with the similar Αἰγύπτιοι δὲ ('as for the Egyptians ...'): two more claims of local sources of knowledge. This diptych of

[142] Colburn 2018 and Colburn 2020a: 95–130 on the Achaemenids and the Egyptian Western Desert (focusing on Darius' reign). See also Agut-Labordère 2023a: 767–73.

[143] This is the conclusion reached by Rollinger 2021d: 213–14.

[144] Schütze 2023a on Cambyses' memory in Achaemenid-ruled Egypt.

[145] Irwin 2017: 108–16 argues that the marriage issue hints at contemporary developments on the same topic in Periclean Athens.

partially converging accounts suggests that, once again, Herodotus is offering an ideologically charged repackaging of the Persian past in Egypt. He presents these competing versions, in other words, as serving particular claims of the group (or groups) within which they circulated or were originally produced.[146] Accordingly, Herodotus' claim that the Egyptians 'made Cambyses their own' through a (bogus) genealogy that would have him descend from Apries, the king before the last pre-conquest pharaoh Amasis, gains a particular – and often overlooked – significance (3.2.1).[147] From an Egyptian perspective, princesses from the royal house could be given away in marriage to foreign powers as a diplomatic tool to claim subordinate status for the grooms and their houses. This strategy was used against several rivals, from the comparatively petty kings of Ugarit to the much more powerful rulers of Ḫatti. Therefore, it may be argued that Herodotus reworked fragments of an intentional Egyptian history aimed at culturally working through the trauma of conquest by appropriating the conquerors' genealogical past to naturalize and neutralize them.[148] Potentially indicative of precisely this subtext is Herodotus' word choice to express the Egyptian incorporation of Cambyses' family: οἰκηιοῦνται ('claim as their own'). Like a ruler of old – by definition, a subordinate according to Egyptian self-understanding – it is the Persians that entered the pharaohs' 'household' (οἶκος), not the other way round. Cambyses came, but Egypt conquered.

Such a scenario leads one to wonder whom such an invention of the tradition might have benefited. What might have been the social surface of a tale that made Cambyses a descendant of a local Egyptian queen? The Persian annexation of Egypt affected the local elites considerably, but not all to the same extent.[149] Although some will have faced immeasurable losses, others must have profited in no small measure from the regime change; it is therefore to be expected that the new political order provoked significant tensions in the upper echelons of local society.[150] It follows that the Egyptian narrative reported by Herodotus may have originated, in this or similar forms, in quarters whose spokesmen had benefited from the conquest. In its aftermath, these individuals were now endeavouring to present it in culturally acceptable terms to a domestic audience and to deflect accusations of 'collaboration'

[146] Luraghi 2001; Giangiulio 2001.

[147] See Schütze 2023b: 35–9 on the relationships between Amasis and the Greek world as a likely social context for stories like this to circulate before Herodotus encountered (part – or some versions – of) them.

[148] See Liverani 1971 on the pharaoh's discursive taming of (alleged) client rulers. On Egyptian dynastic policy note Wilson 2009: 25; Grajetzki 2020: 773; and now Nielsen 2022: 216. See De Martino 2022b: 251 for a Hittite perspective. One prominent case in point is that of Ḫattušili III, who was forced to negotiate fiercely the status of his daughter at the Egyptian court. Royal traditions hinging on the concept of a 'stranger king' are a well-attested phenomenon in cultural anthropology: Graeber and Sahlins 2017: 223–48.

[149] Schütze 2020: 225–6 notes widespread changes in the administration and the complete disappearance of Amasis-period elites whose members had risen under the last pharaoh and bound themselves to his power.

[150] Udjahorresnet is the best-known example of someone who profited massively from Cambyses' takeover and was, therefore, most likely to need to account for his fortune within his wider social context: Colburn 2020b.

with Persian forces.[151] As for the version attributed to the Persians, the insistence on Cambyses' desire to marry a daughter of Amasis suggests more than superficial knowledge of the logic characteristic of the Achaemenid court on Herodotus' part. In Persia, a dynastic policy centred on the maternal branch of the royal family played a role of paramount importance throughout the empire's history.[152]

Given the lack of corroborating evidence outside of Herodotus' text, the argument presented here rests upon a degree of (educated) guesswork. Its strength, however, lies in the fact that it builds on a well-established and well-known practice of Herodotean storytelling: engaging with and reworking competing origin stories of individuals and communities alike. Seen from this perspective, the case of Cambyses' alleged Egyptian family also demonstrates the distinctive character of Herodotus' work as a history of traditions far more than facts. They can range from the fairly remote to traditions developed from very recent, even contemporary, events.[153] Cambyses' *logos*, it becomes clear, is structured along the lines of a barely disguised rebuttal of (what we must infer was) the version of the recent past promoted by political and intellectual networks (both Persian and local) connected to or supported by the Great King. Once again, this was a story of triumphant conquest and subjugation of the remotest lands. Just as he had with the 'most trustworthy story' of Cyrus' death, Herodotus demolished it from the ground up.

It has often been argued that the entire account of the Egyptian campaign can also be read as setting the stage for the Persian history presented in Book 3 (in essence, Darius' rise to power). It follows that a look at the Scythian campaign discussed in Book 4 – before Darius' expedition to Greece, the most catastrophic debacle of the newly crowned Great King – offers further insights into Herodotus' rebuttal of the history of the Achaemenid Empire promoted by its rulers.[154]

'When I reached the sea': Darius and the north

Herodotus ends his account of the Ionian Revolt's first phase, culminating with Sardis' memorable and consequence-laden fall, with an amusing portrait of Darius I at his dining table. A courtier was tasked, we are told, with tending to the king's needs during the royal banquet and all the while whispering in his ear, 'Sire, remember the Athenians' (5.105.1–2). Historically implausible as it is, such a

[151] Schütze 2023b: 43–7 on Egyptian elites' responses to Persia's rise. Note moreover that Udjahorresnet, in his inscriptional autobiography, stresses (too much?) how well he served both of his masters before and after the Persian takeover, keen to emphasize a continuity in rulership, which would have shown him in a positive light. That Herodotus, for his part, does not credit the 'Egyptian' tradition (3.2.2) might be taken as a sign of his rebuttal of an accommodating account of the conquest, for frequently in the *Histories* he presents a version of a story in a way that suggests how it should be understood, even without explicit authorial comment.

[152] Llewellyn-Jones 2019, 2021; Brosius 2023: 984–8.

[153] See Burkert 1985 on Herodotus as a 'traditional historian' in the sense of a historian of traditions.

[154] Irwin 2017: 96 and Rollinger 2021d: 198 read the Egyptian *logos* or parts of it as an anticipation of future Persian history in Herodotus' work.

vignette is nonetheless revealing. For one thing, it suggests Herodotus' familiarity with a crucial element of Persian representation of imperial power: the (ideally unlimited) extent of their power. The Ionians have capitulated, the courtier implies, but the Athenians have not (yet): by their very existence, they demonstrate that the Achaemenid Empire is not universal. Thus, intervention against them is necessary. Secondly, the anecdote also illustrates Herodotus' sensitivity to Achaemenid strategies of conceptualizing and presenting historical development: as long as Persian rule and the world are not coterminous, 'happiness for mankind' cannot be achieved, and war must be waged.[155] That such intellectual strategies were a staple of Persian imperial historical thought has been shown by several studies devoted to the logic underlying the evolution of the so-called *dahɒyāva* lists (of the lands and peoples under Persian rule) as they have come down to us in surviving inscriptions.[156] In particular, Silvia Balatti has pointed out the unprecedented abundance of geo-ethnographic details that appear in the categorization of the peoples located at the extreme western and eastern borders of the (political and conceptual) world of the Great Kings of Persia. She has persuasively interpreted such spatial awareness as a concrete indication of a Persian attempt to mould the image of Achaemenid power presented to the empire's (actual or potential) subjects on the ground.[157]

If this is true, it should be expected that Herodotus' commitment to refuting the Great Kings' expansionist rhetoric will also be apparent in Darius' case. This should not come as much of a surprise. It has been demonstrated that in several places throughout the *Histories* Herodotus makes use of tropes from Near Eastern imagery (reaching back in time, at least to the Neo-Assyrians) to compose a portrait of Darius that is, at best, ambivalent, and at worst outspokenly critical.[158]

The Scythian campaign of about 512 BC offers a welcome, hitherto relatively neglected, opportunity to observe Herodotus once more at work in his critical confrontation with the (philosophy of) history of the developing Persian Empire.[159] First, however, some brief remarks are required on the role that the Eurasian steppe peoples (both in the far east and the far west) played in Darius' construction of his kingly persona in competition with his predecessors – especially Cyrus. This preamble serves to account for Herodotus' choice to devote such a considerable space of his inquiry into the north to the Scythian campaign of Cambyses' self-appointed successor (4.83–143).[160]

[155] See Nenci 1994: 314 on Darius' banquet scene, pointing out the Persian ideological background to the account.

[156] Jacobs 2017: 7–10.

[157] See Balatti 2021 on the Yaṭnā and Sakā in the Achaemenid inscriptions from Darius onwards.

[158] See Rollinger 2017, Ruffing 2018 and Blankenship 2022: 91–6 on Hdt. 5.49.5, teasing out the imperial background of world mapping as presented in the *Histories*. Although difficult to prove, the presentation of the so-called royal road (Almagor 2020; Brouard 2023) as an easy stretch to cover might perhaps be taken as a code-rebuttal of Darius' universalistic claims to rule over a land 'inhabited by people of all kinds' (Old Persian *vispazana-*: Schmitt 2014: 280, notably a qualifier only used in Darius' inscriptions, later replaced by the somewhat diminished *paruzana-*, meaning 'of many kinds'; Schmitt 2014: 229).

[159] See Tuplin 2010 for a reassessment of Darius' campaign.

[160] See also the abridged version given by Ctesias in *FGrHist* 588 F13 (21).

Within the vast bibliography on the Bisutun Inscription, there is no detailed exploration of the reasons for the disproportionate role reserved for an individual named Skunkha. A prominent figure among the 'pointy-hatted' Sakā inhabiting the far north-eastern reaches of the empire (along the Syrdaryo Delta towards the Aral or, perhaps, yet further east towards the Ferghana Valley or even Lake Balkaš) Skunkha is prominently portrayed at the tail-end of the series of liar-kings defeated during the civil war that led to Darius' accession to the imperial throne.[161] Scholarly disinterest in the figure of Skunkha is especially striking given the importance that the Great King attributed to his defeat of the Saka chieftain. The need to insert the campaign against Skunkha and the relief depicting him necessitated the destruction of the already completed monument and the consequent relocation of the Elamite version of the inscription.[162]

Some years ago, Matthew Waters convincingly explained this unprecedented move as a response by Darius to the imperial trauma of the death of Cyrus in Central Asia.[163] Following in his footsteps, Rollinger and Julian Degen demonstrated how Skunkha's (purported) submission fulfilled the crucial task of presenting Darius as victorious even where the Achaemenid Empire's founder had failed – and died.[164] The triumph in Central Asia turned a page of history that had remained painfully open for more than a generation. As previously mentioned, the silence of the extant sources on any similar undertaking by either of Cyrus' sons is particularly meaningful precisely because of the impact of Cyrus' last campaign. This background, therefore, offered Darius a unique opportunity to come to terms with the legacy of the greatest conqueror in both living memory and the imperial record of the ancient Near East to date.

Given these considerations, there is reason to assume that the Danube campaign of 512 obeyed a similar logic. After all, Cambyses' annexation of Egypt (with its Nubian aftermath) loomed large as a precedent that the new would-be expander of the realm could not ignore, especially in the light of his unorthodox succession.[165] From this perspective, then, a second victorious campaign against the Scythians (presented, since Cyrus' time, as the empire's quintessential enemy, but now located to the west) implied an assertion of truly universal dominance. After taming Skunkha, campaigning across the Black Sea into the western steppes meant that Darius was able to boast of his conquest literally from the Upper Sea (the Aegean or even further to the north, towards the Azov and beyond) to the Lower Sea (the Aral).[166] Thereafter, according to Mesopotamian geography and

[161] Briant 1996: 140; Balatti 2021: 146; Potts 2023: 437–8. The official account of the events is presented at DB_p col. V § 74.

[162] Bae 2001: 16–30. For the Elamite version consult Bābolġānī 2015.

[163] Waters 2014: 76; Degen 2022d: 530.

[164] Rollinger and Degen 2021b.

[165] Schwinghammer 2021; Potts 2023: 427–36.

[166] Rollinger 2023b: 902–4 rightfully points out that the geography displayed in the Achaemenid inscriptions is primarily a cultural, not (only) a historical – definitely not an administrative – one. It follows that, for Darius, what really mattered was not whether he defeated Skunkha across the Aral, the Caspian or the Syrdaryo but that he had conquered territory beyond anything achieved by any ruler before – and ideally after – him. Evidence that Herodotus knew the implications of such a claim and likely its imperial background is

cosmology, both space and time would come to an end, for the king had achieved a feat worthy of only heroes and gods.[167] In the age of Persia, credibly claiming the title of 'expander of the realm' became more challenging with each generation, as the first two Great Kings had already conquered more than any ruler in recorded history.[168]

Precious little is known of the outcomes of this expedition (assuming that there was only one). However, that it did not end in a fiasco – let alone the dismal catastrophe recorded in Herodotus – is made all but certain by the recent discovery of the Phanagoria inscription, unearthed during excavations in the territory of what is now the Taman Peninsula at the mouth of the Sea of Azov.[169] Although in a deplorable state of preservation, the inscription leaves little doubt as to its origins during the reign of Darius: his name likely appears on the stone.[170] Moreover, its very survival testifies to the success (whether permanent military conquest or the establishment of tributary bonds, still a matter of dispute) of an enterprise whose significance in Darius' eyes arguably came close to Skunkha's submission. As such, it must be assumed that this feat was recorded and disseminated far and wide within and without the empire's borderlands (indeed, as the inscription testifies, as far north as Crimea).[171]

Of course, this does not imply that Herodotus had direct knowledge of the Phanagoria inscription or the campaign against Skunkha – and, indeed, it remains an unresolved question whether and to what extent he was aware of the existence and features of the relief, if not the text, of Bisutun.[172] However, elsewhere in the *Histories*, Herodotus demonstrates remarkable familiarity with the political, ideological and cultural implications of Persian epigraphic practice. He seems particularly aware of the Great Kings' inclination to mark the remote corners of their domains with monuments – inscribed or not. Accordingly, it is difficult not to see the Herodotean account of the western campaign as a conscious reversal of what was intended as a story of triumph: the triumph of Darius, victorious yet again at the ends of the earth, where no one before him had dared venture.[173] Various

demonstrated in Degen 2022d: 529–34.

167 See Jacobs 2017: 7–8 on the spatial evolution of Achaemenid inscriptions after Darius' reign, and Balatti 2021: 148 for the references to the *Sakā tayai paradraya* (Elamite *^{m}sákka appa ^{d}KAM.MEŠ miuttumanna*, Akkadian [^{KUR}*gí*]*miri ša akhu ullû ša nari marratum*) from DSe onwards (Schmitt 2009: 123).

168 Kuhrt 2021; Waters 2023: 393–408; Potts 2023: 438–52.

169 The inscription has already triggered a considerable amount of scholarship: for texts and commentary, both historical and linguistic, see Avram 2019; Kuznetsov 2019; Rung and Gabelko 2019; Schmitt 2019.

170 Kuznetsov and Nikitin 2019: 5.

171 Rollinger 2023b: 905–7.

172 Hdt. 4.87.1 mentions γράμματα Ἀσσύρια engraved by Darius (on a monument?) after his crossing of the Bosphorus. It remains unclear whether a monument accompanied the inscription of Phanagoria. At any rate, the passage suggests Herodotus had knowledge of both the Achaemenid practice of setting up inscriptions in the far north and, one may assume, their ideological meaning, if not their content. The same may be suggested of Bisutun.

173 Rollinger 2014b.

clues within the text of the *Histories*, and not only in the context of the account of the expedition itself, converge to support this hypothesis.[174]

First, a hint is provided by the story of the Egyptian priests' refusal of Darius' attempt to erect a statue celebrating his conquests. This suggests that Herodotus was familiar with at least one official account issued by imperial authorities of the Bosphoran campaign, of which the Phanagoria inscription may have been part. The fragmented state of that text, unfortunately, does not allow us to know if that was indeed the case or how important a piece in this narrative the inscription was. In response to Darius' pretensions, Herodotus negatively contrasts the memory of the pharaoh Sesostris, whose triumphs were said to have reached far beyond those same north-western territories over which the Persians claimed power (2.103.1).[175] Secondly, and again in suspicious analogy to the diplomatic operation of the Ethiopian king, the delivery by a herald of five arrows (along with a bird, a mouse and a frog) as a gift to the advancing monarch seems to allude to the warlike qualities of Achaemenid rulers. Not unlike the Ethiopian case, here too such attributes are appropriated, with a clearly ominous subtext, by an enemy (the Scythians). Like Skunkha in the east, in the west, they were also to be portrayed, in the Achaemenid version of events, at best, as obedient participants in the benefits of the empire, at worst as powerless subjects.[176] A third significant component in the narrative is the homily that the Scythian ruler Idanthyrsos delivers to Darius in rejection of the outrageous request that he present earth and water as a token of submission to Persian rule (4.179). In a fascinating reading of this passage, Bruce Lincoln uncovered traces of an identity-defining indigenous discourse centred around the cult of the tomb of a prominent individual of a Saka community (a king or, perhaps more pertinently, a 'big man') whose possessions must have been affected in some way by Persian encroachment.[177]

It is not hard to believe that Darius' campaign represented a watershed in the ecosystem of numerous indigenous communities across the north-west. Similar patterns are well attested for other liminal regions, such as Cyprus in

[174] García Sánchez 2009: 283–5; Allgaier 2022: 39–45.

[175] Discussed in Rollinger 2021d: 197. See Payen 1995 on Herodotus' reference to a wider world than the one claimed by Darius to undercut Achaemenid imperial rhetoric. Grethlein 2013: 187–90 comments on the episode in a way that suggests that he is also thinking about possible Persian ways of doing history. It is interesting to note that two Egyptian inscriptions of Darius mentioning the Sakā (DSe and DZe, the first, perhaps significantly in the light of Herodotus' account, a statue of the king) use qualifiers unmatched in any other document so far recovered, calling them *S-g pḫ sk t3* and *Sk pḥrsk (t3?)*, the meaning of which is still debated and far from understood: Balatti 2021: 147–8 with references. If the reconstruction of the possible social surface of Cambyses' Egyptian stories in Egypt is sound, one is entitled to wonder if comparable dynamics were at work even under Darius, whose footprint in the country was by no means lighter, perhaps also overshadowing his predecessor's legacy; see Colburn 2018.

[176] See Hdt. 4.131.1 for the gifts and Swart 2021: 249–58 for a recent discussion of the Apadana reliefs depicting some of the peoples whom the Bosphoran campaign likely targeted.

[177] Lincoln 2012: 437–45. Such a reading of the evidence may appear to go too far. However, the role played by conspicuous tumuli in shaping the spatial politics in the Eurasian steppes is well known to both anthropologists and archaeologists: Barfield 2021. It is, therefore, significant that some of the most remarkable examples of such monuments come precisely from the Black Sea area allegedly targeted by Darius' expedition.

the time of Sargon II. Herodotus himself seems to have preserved evidence of dynastic legends which may have reworked local traditions reflecting the impact of Achaemenid imperial culture and dynastic self-representation on indigenous power-holders. The most prominent example is perhaps the Argead (Macedonian) dynastic legend as reported in the *Histories*.[178]

An additional factor that should not be overlooked is Herodotus' surprisingly fine-grained knowledge of (at least some of) the socio-political realities of the Bosphoran area. As pointed out by several scholars (and by Herodotus himself), multilingualism and socio-cultural complexity were at home here: the local environment is more than likely to have acted as a privileged conductor of information, and as a network fuelling the circulation of stories related to the rise and expansion of Persian power. It seems that Herodotus selected a (local) account of the meeting between Darius and a high-ranking member of a Bosphoran community to create the narrative framework in which to insert another story, that of a wise advisor ignored (Croesus for Cyrus in Central Asia) or misinterpreted advice (Cambyses and the Ethiopian king). The Nubian campaign served particularly well as a prelude to a further tale of a dramatic failure of Persian expansionist ambitions.[179] Considering these clues, Herodotus' idealization of the Scythian way of life perhaps needs to be re-evaluated. Hartog interpreted it as a paradigmatic representation of cultural otherness. More likely, it functioned as a narrative anticipation intended to disavow the consistency of Persian territorial claims, so clearly advanced in the cases of Skunkha and the Phanagoria inscription.[180]

However, perhaps the most conclusive evidence supporting this suggestion is Herodotus' presentation of Darius' humiliating retreat across the Danube. In the economy of the narrative, this outcome not only suggests that the campaign ended in failure (which is dubious in light of evidence such as the Phanagoria inscription); Herodotus' account exposes Darius as a coward, fearful of the enemy's counter-attack, which the historian makes clear could have destroyed the Persian army (4.133–43). On closer scrutiny, Herodotus' account of a resounding Persian defeat turns out to be interspersed with several distinctive tropes of Achaemenid ideology.[181] Moreover, they are reworked to serve such a complex reinterpretation of the imperial past as to make it unlikely that their presence is the outcome of chance. On the contrary, the most logical conclusion is that, once again, Herodotus' primary objective lay in a revisionist attack against the 'officially sanctioned' Persian account of the empire's history which the king and his officials had disseminated among his subject peoples and beyond. The royal inscriptions give a taste of what the Persian version of the story might have looked like.

[178] Rollinger and Degen 2021b: 200; Rollinger 2023b: 905. See Degen 2019: 95–6 on Herodotus' account of the Macedonian royal house's foundation legend (8.137.4–5) and its clear Near Eastern background.

[179] See Hdt. 4.24.1 on the several languages spoken around the Black Sea by the autochthonous Sakā groups.

[180] Hdt. 4.46.2–3 with Hartog 1980: 34–60.

[181] van de Mieroop 2023: 212: in Herodotus' narrative the 'hunted became the hunters', following the same logic displayed already in Sargon II's inscriptions, where enemies are scolded as defeated cowards with no other option but to flee beyond the 'bitter sea'. For the motif's afterlife, see Rollinger and Wiesehöfer 2022.

At Bisutun, Darius repeatedly boasts of his crossing of imposing waterways, and his use of sophisticated military engineering. This was a gesture deeply embedded in a long ancient Near Eastern ideological tradition, a cornerstone of the motif of the conquering ruler.[182] Particularly relevant here is the fact that this feat takes on a central importance in Darius' account of the campaign against Skunkha, at the extreme north-eastern borders of the empire (and thus, in the logic of Persian imperial cosmology, the edge of the world itself).[183] Ideally placed at the opposite extreme of the royal domains, this time in the far west, the Danube thus appears in this mental universe to be the counterpart of the Syrdaryo – or, according to some interpretations, of the Aral Sea. It would be no surprise if Darius chose to emphasize this western Scythian campaign in terms similar to those of Bisutun.[184] In this Achaemenid account of the generation before Herodotus, the north-western expedition is likely to have played a far more prominent role than the 'Persian Wars' that the *Histories* have done so much to establish as the defining experience of the age.[185]

Herodotus' version of the campaign indicates his commitment to overturning the Persians' memory of defining events of their imperial past. The starring characters of Darius' triumph of engineering are subjects of the periphery. The message is that the crossing itself was made possible thanks to the Ionians alone. This narrative shift ousts Darius from the centre-stage position that the logic of the context would require, as Bisutun makes abundantly clear. Not only that: the crossing of the Danube – in the Persian conceptual universe, an act worthy of celebration in and of itself – is glossed over as merely preparatory to a long, exhausting and ultimately fruitless pursuit of an elusive enemy.[186] As if this were not enough, the entire undertaking ends in utter failure, and only the loyalty of a handful of Ionians left to guard the bridge spares Darius a death ominously similar to Cyrus'. Once again, such storytelling implicitly reaffirms the complete logistical

[182] See Rollinger 2013a. Cf. DB_p col. I § 18 (DB_e § 17; DB_b § 17) on the crossing of the Tigris in the context of Nidintū-bēl's insurrection.

[183] See Klinkott 2021 on Darius' relationship with the sea compared to his imperial predecessors, possibly related to the new scale of Achaemenid claims to world rulership.

[184] The mention of the 'Scythian beyond the Sea' (Old Persian *Sakā tayai paradraya*, Elamite *^{m}sákka appa ^{d}KAM.MEŠ miuttumanna*, Akkadian [^{KUR}*gí*]*miri ša aḫḫu ullû ša nari marratum*) in DSe might therefore be taken as suggestive precisely of a narrative of this kind: Balatti 2021: 146–8.

[185] See Proietti 2021: 58–122 on the memorialization of Marathon already before Herodotus and her concluding remarks (pp. 443–55) on the *Histories*' stratigraphy, which built upon and fit into its own canvas an oversized repertoire of mid-first-millennium BC memories of several societies' pasts, or at least certain group understandings of these. Moreover, from an imperial standpoint, the Persian Wars were likely understood as little more than a campaign aimed at subduing an unruly borderland (Rollinger 2023b: 909–17). As partially subject to the empire themselves, it stretches credibility to argue that such an understanding of events escaped a Greek-speaking audience; therefore, the spin given to the narrative by Aeschylus and Herodotus, among others, must be understood through the lens of intentional history.

[186] Even such a detail seems meant to disprove another central tenet of Darius' self-presentation at Bisutun: the river crossing in Central Asia unfailingly ends with Skunkha being delivered to him in fetters, for no one can escape the rightful vengeance of the Great King, backed as it is (or even driven) by Ahura Mazda's hand; note Sahlins 2022: 5 on the implication of the divine as a precondition for – and therefore a guarantee of – human action.

dependence of the Persian army on its (non-Persian) subjects.[187] Herodotus' work not only shows a protracted and sophisticated (and often critical) confrontation with the ideology of Achaemenid universalism over the course of three generations, from Cyrus to Darius.[188] It reveals a single, dialectically articulated intellectual thread underlying the disparate episodes discussed above. In the *Histories*, the story of Teispid-Achaemenid imperialism becomes a narrative device to call into question the empire's intellectual construction of its own past.

All that remains at this point is to turn our attention to the reign of Xerxes.[189]

The path of (re)conquest: Xerxes and the (western) sea people

After Darius' death, a dark future awaited the Persian Empire – or so at least some (much later) observers thought.[190] Xerxes' reign, and its end especially, provided an early foretaste of what was to come.[191] Authors such as Plato, Justin and Aelian offer accounts of the life and rule of one of the empire's most powerful kings that paradigmatically fit into a long historiographic tradition. Until recently, the aftermath of Plataea and Mycale (479 BC) was interpreted as a point of no return, at least for the reign of Xerxes. The defeat in Greece would have provided a pretext for court intrigues and political instability across the empire, thus fundamentally undermining Persian rule.[192] As for the king, he was usually presented by Greeks and, later, Roman authors in sharp contrast with his predecessor and in (alarming) analogy with Cambyses, as puerile and cruel, effortlessly manipulated by eunuchs, courtiers (and courtesans), but especially by the women of the royal house.[193] Much of the responsibility for the crafting of such a black legend must be laid at Herodotus' feet.[194] Xerxes is depicted in the *Histories* not only as a sadistic and bloodthirsty despot but morbidly greedy, childish and easily overcome by his emotions.[195]

[187] Predictably, the administrative record paints a significantly different scenario: Hyland 2024.
[188] Hdt. 6.98.2 can thus be read as a further indictment of the foundational imperial claim to bring about 'happyness for mankind'. Thanks to Dr Jan Haywood for this reference.
[189] See Proietti 2021: 123–216 on the aftermath of Xerxes' campaign across the (cultural) memories of the Greek world.
[190] Pl. *Leg*. 695e.
[191] Compare Just. *Epit*. 3.1.1 and Ael. *VH* 13.3, with Thomas 2017: 24–35.
[192] Stoneman 2015: 1–15; Rollinger and Degen 2023 (on Persian decadence).
[193] Rollinger and Degen 2021c: 430–40. See Bridges 2014: 99–190 for a recent overview of Xerxes' representations beyond the *Histories*.
[194] Grethlein 2009 (Xerxes' portrait); Baragwanath 2008: 240–88 (Herodotus' explanations for Xerxes' behaviour). Llewellyn-Jones 2022: 233–5 comments on how Herodotus projects his Xerxes and the impact of his narrative through later centuries within the broader Mediterranean world (a topic on which the go-to reference is Madreiter 2012).
[195] On Xerxes' cowardice see e.g. Hdt. 8.115.4. Episodes of the king's cruelty are legion, but note at least Hdt. 8.118–19, and cf. Rollinger 2010. Emblematic of his greed is Hdt. 8.35, with the outlandish claim (for a ruler otherwise proverbially described as mind-bogglingly rich) that the sack of Delphi was not the least important reason for the campaign. The (unmanly) emotional nature of the Achaemenid monarch is deftly brought to light in Hdt. 7.45: see Harrison 2000 and already Aesch. *Pers*. 931–3.

Such a portrait is radically antithetical to the fundamental attributes of the Great King of Persia as they emerge from the royal inscriptions.[196] This not only leads to the obvious conclusion that the Herodotean profile is tendentious but, more significantly, it allows for the suspicion that Herodotus wanted subtly and subversively to offer his audience a presentation of Xerxes as hopelessly unfit to succeed to the role left vacant by Darius.[197] If we accept such a conclusion, it follows that one of the pillars of the historical understanding of the Achaemenid past is radically challenged: namely, the idea of an unbroken succession of valiant conqueror-kings, each destined to surpass his predecessor. The reign of Xerxes occupies almost a third of the narrative of the *Histories*. But there are scattered clues whose examination once again allows us to see how the historian refutes and upends this Achaemenid perspective. Such clues are also to be found in later traditions, most likely dependent on Herodotus' account. Taken as a whole, these traces leave a trail that is worth following for it seems to run consistently throughout the entire span of imperial history captured in the *Histories*.[198]

A good starting point is provided by the notorious statement at the opening of Book 7 that Xerxes became king through the machinations of his mother, Atossa, who held all the power at court (7.3). Everything about this claim (sources, reliability, implications for understanding the court as a social system) remains contested, as archival sources are silent regarding Cyrus' daughter.[199] The well-known version of the same events provided by Xerxes in the so-called 'Harem Inscription' deserves scrutiny, however (XPf § 4). In his account, not only is Atossa conspicuously absent, but the emphasis is on Ahura Mazda's will in guiding Darius' choice of the rightful heir. This take on events is remarkably consistent with Darius' version of his own accession to the throne and, of course, three generations previously, that of Cyrus. As stressed by Marshall Sahlins, in almost every attested culture before – and often after – the rise of Christianity, the gods, or one (supreme) god, 'as empowering agent', act as 'the condition of the political possibility' for those who believe in them.[200]

Remarks such as Sahlins' have implications, especially when measured in the context of a king succeeding someone as weighty as Darius. For Xerxes, it seems, divine sanction was more than a well-established recourse to an indispensable element of royal self-perception. It was an essential means for him to place himself on a par with his predecessor, Darius, whom he was required by Achaemenid ideology to outperform.[201] If this was the case, the role Herodotus attributes to Atossa (based on the silence of the Persian sources, a disproportionate one) appears in a different light. Much more than an early example of Orientalist harem voyeurism, Herodotus' account of the succession can be interpreted as a head-on

196 DNb (at least for the Achaemenid dynasty, most likely a founding text) and XPl, where the verbatim recourse to Darius' self-staging seems to betray something more than the imitation of an authoritative precedent.

197 Bridges 2014: 45–72 for a different interpretation of Herodotus' Xerxes narrative.

198 Cf. Ginzburg 2006.

199 Waters 2023: 408–9; Potts 2023: 485–96; Brosius 2023: 971–2. See also Henkelman 2010 on the archival silence concerning Cyrus' daughter, at least among the published tablets.

200 Sahlins 2022: 5.

201 Cf. Degen 2024a: 49–50.

attack on the claims of divine sanction advanced by Xerxes and indispensable for his hold on the imperial throne.[202]

This argument does not require Herodotus to be aware of (let alone to have seen) the text of the Harem Inscription – just as direct knowledge of Bisutun is not necessary for the arguments advanced above in relation to Darius' Danube campaign. As the example of Phanagoria demonstrates, the importance of these monuments was such that the *content* of their inscriptions must have circulated across the empire, in written or oral form. What matters, in short, is not Herodotus' familiarity with one specific example but with the structuring ideas (geographical, political and historical) conveyed by Achaemenid monuments and inscriptions. Herodotus' mastery of the fundamentals of Xerxes' self-depiction, and of Achaemenid ideology, is clear elsewhere – and further supports this explanation of Atossa's surprising prominence.[203]

A second case study again brings to the fore the manipulations to which such intellectual devices could be subjected in the hands of authors critical of their implications.[204] According to Plutarch, Xerxes refused to eat figs until he had subdued Greece (*Reg. Xerx.* 2 (*Mor.* 173c)). Such a claim seems to recall (perhaps not without a sarcastically demeaning undertone – a hint at the embarrassing comparison between father and son?) the reminder to Darius to 'remember the Athenians' (5.105.1–2). The Herodotean colour of this passage is evident; it is

[202] This is not to say that Atossa did not play a role in Xerxes' succession. However, that he himself made no mention of her, besides stressing the fundamentally patriarchal principle of succession, might be a sign that Atossa's legacy had been more critical as a legitimizing tool for Darius than for his son. Admittedly, it might be argued that to mention this would have been unprecedented in a Persian royal inscription. However, it is also worth stressing that, at the time of Xerxes' accession, apart from Darius, there was no precedent, as far as we know, for Persian inscriptions at all. Perhaps more importantly, ancient Near Eastern tradition records cases of royal women successfully navigating the male-dominated world of rulers and their deeds. The case of Samu-Ramat (wife of Šamši-Adad V in the ninth century BC) is relevant due to the impact of the Assyrian precedent in shaping Persian imperial practices: Baker 2023: 279–81 and Frahm 2023: 166–8 on the queen, with bibliography. Following Graeber and Sahlins 2017: 423–31, it could even be suggested that bringing Atossa into the spotlight would have thrown Xerxes into the dilemma sparked by the principle of regressing status, which troubled many kings around the world, most likely including Darius himself. Hence the choice of stressing Ahura Mazda's agency in his rise to power, to exorcise both Cyrus – through the obliteration of Atossa – and, perhaps especially, his all-powerful and looming father.

[203] Given the queen's prominent role in the *Persians*, it is relevant to ask whether Aeschylus was aware of how important divine sanction was for Xerxes' self-representation and, more generally, for the Achaemenids' understanding of their royal past. The identification of the queen with Atossa remains contentious: cf. Harrison 2000: 45–58 and the sceptical view of Sancisi-Weerdenburg 1993: 24. Recent discussion of the *Persians* takes the equivalence for granted (e.g. Garvie 2023: 80).

[204] On Greek writing (including what we call history) as an act of resistance to universalistic claims of ancient Near Eastern empires, note van de Mieroop 2023: 199–217. Harrison 2015 already recognized Herodotus' awareness and subversion of Persian imperial ideology (conclusively demonstrated by Rollinger 2021d). As this paper has argued all along, however, there is arguably more at stake in Herodotus than this alone. Indeed, the question is whether a characteristic Persian understanding of the Persian past (a way of doing history) might have impacted both the subject of Herodotus' masterpiece and how he handled it.

likely that the story predated Plutarch (but by how much?).[205] The significance of this seemingly trivial anecdote lies in the paramount importance attached by the Achaemenid rulers to horticulture, and in particular to the collecting of prized specimens from the furthest corners of the earth. Such exemplars, to be preserved in the celebrated *paradeisoi*, demonstrate the Great King's mastery over both nature – which he is able to tame and shape at will – and the territories (and peoples) from which a given plant originates. It is the physical embodiment of a metaphor for universal rule.[206]

As demonstrated by the Persepolis archives and confirmed incontrovertibly by recent excavations at the site of the monumental gateway of Tol-e Ajori, since the time of Cyrus the construction of imposing and lavish *paradeisoi* was a characteristic feature of the politics of Persian kings – one with a dense symbolic subtext, often imbued with cosmological undertones. This is clearly shown by the recent discovery of an archival mention of one such garden complex, a *paradeisos* evocatively named Mišbašiyatiš or 'All Happiness'.[207] The exponential growth of this institution in the reign of Darius indicates the very significant role that idealized representations of the natural world played in the politics of a ruler's memory in the 'Persian version' of the dynastic and imperial past. The Great King is the divinely chosen figure who first tames the world and then populates it with countless small-scale reproductions of it: 'All Happiness' or, according to a different translation of the Elamite toponym, 'Manifold Prosperity'.[208] The emphasis on the empire's peripheries as the source of much of the flora and fauna that populates the *paradeisoi* is significant, as it is at the borderlands that royal power becomes most apparent.

This cultural background helps to explain two curious mentions of Xerxes' and Darius' relationship with trees in Herodotus.[209] His accounts show an awareness of the cultural subtext discussed above. Interestingly, the historian might not have been the first to elaborate on this topic. In Aeschylus' *Persians*, the concept of imperial prosperity (ὄλβος) is central and repeatedly expressed by way of floral or tree-related metaphors.[210] Of course, this does not require the poet to know the exact features of structures such as those located in the surroundings of Tol-e Ajori, much less their Elamite name(s).

[205] Llewellyn-Jones 2022: 142 claims – without reference – that the anecdote comes from Herodotus. However, skimming through the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*, I was unable to find the exact reference, given that within Herodotus' work, a search under συκ* gives but five results, none of which is related to the context discussed here (1.71, 1.193 (2x), 2.40, 4.23).

[206] Lincoln 2012: 59–80; Tuplin 2018b.

[207] See Henkelman 2023 for the text and a translation and commentary of PT 49, referencing the Elamite name Mišbašiyatiš, together with bibliography and a discussion of Tol-e Ajori.

[208] See Henkelman 2021 with Henkelman and Stolper 2021 for two exhaustive surveys of the archival evidence related to tree-planting in and around Persepolis. Note DSf § 9, mentioning precious wood from Lebanon, Egypt (possibly via Nubia) and Gandhara. Henkelman 2023: 154 on Mišbašiyatiš.

[209] Cf. Hdt. 7.27 (a gift made to Darius by the rich Lydian Pythios) and 7.32.1 on Xerxes' engagement with a beautiful plane tree. See the commentary on the two passages in Vannicelli and Corcella 2017: 338–9, 348, which do not mention the social and spiritual significance of trees in the ancient Near East or their unique relationship with kings.

[210] Proietti 2020b: 37–9.

Nevertheless, the meaning of such *paradeisoi* and their contents must have been widely understood given the paramount role assigned to them by the Great Kings. The fact that, already in the oldest extant Greek tragedy, Xerxes proves incapable of preserving his people's prosperity – to say nothing of expanding it – might be taken as an early example of a subversive reworking of Achaemenid imperial rhetoric. If so, Herodotus can be seen as having picked up and sharpened this approach, ultimately making of it a cornerstone of his historical work.[211]

This leaves the possibility that the anecdote preserved by Plutarch may have originated at a significantly earlier date, perhaps the beginning of the fifth century. The weight that Xerxes attached to his role as a gardener is vividly exemplified by a splendid seal depicting the ruler (explicitly named) in a worshipping pose before a lush tree.[212] Against this background, the implications of his oath not to eat figs seems obvious. It also fits well into the framework of Herodotus' subtle yet relentless delegitimization of Xerxes' worthiness as a monarch. Like his ancestor, the new Great King proves incapable of expanding the Achaemenid realm to the west, and the happiness glorified in the royal *paradeisoi* can, therefore, only be partial and not all-encompassing as suggested by the name given to the complex of Mišbašiyatiš located near Tol-e Ajori. This clearly could not have been the version of imperial history presented by Xerxes, and indeed it was not: in the lists of *dahayāva* attributed to him (dated both before and after the campaign against Greece), the Yaunā across the sea are still duly displayed among the peoples of the empire.[213] This may be insufficient to prove the case, but Herodotus' account of the reasons that prompted Xerxes' expedition against Greece at the beginning of Book 7 leaves no room for doubt as to his subversive intent.[214]

Herodotus would not, of course, have had access to the most intimate conversations between Xerxes and his senior commanders. This only makes the reasons put into the king's mouth stand out more: they blatantly betray Herodotus' familiarity with the cultural coordinates of Persian discourse on the empire and its past. The first argument made by Xerxes concerns his desire not to prove himself inferior to his predecessors, as well as the need to acquire 'no less power for the Persians' (μηδὲ ἐλάσσω προσκετήσομαι δύναμιν Πέρσῃσι), hence more territory for the empire.[215] Two features of this claim deserve emphasis. First, fifth-century Achaemenid sigillography reveals numerous examples of warlike motifs featuring the enemies of the Great King – borderland peoples from Central Asia to Egypt and, of course, Greece.[216] As pointed out by Wu Xin, the underlying reason for such artistic production is to promote an image of the ruler as invincible warrior. This representation served the purpose of strengthening the ties between the imperial elites and the court. The emphasis placed by Darius I on the military

[211] It remains unclear how well Herodotus knew Aeschylus: Baragwanath 2023.

[212] See Llewellyn-Jones 2022: 235, who sadly does not provide any references to help readers identify the seal (of which he does offer a sketch, however). See Briant 1996: 246 with another, more detailed drawing of the same object, where the ruler's name is also included.

[213] XPh § 3 (Jacobs 2017: 30; Balatti 2021; Degen 2024a: 49–50).

[214] Klinkott 2023: 16–51.

[215] Hdt. 7.8A2 with Vannicelli and Corcella 2017: 305–6, where imperial expansionism and generational competition are not addressed.

[216] Tuplin 2020.

proficiency required of future generations of the imperial ruling class (including those appointed at the empire's fringes) had already established an authoritative precedent that Xerxes seems to have confidently and consistently taken up.[217]

We encounter here once more the motif of intergenerational competition characteristic of ancient Near Eastern empires, a motif which, it has been argued, already played a fundamental role in shaping dynastic self-understanding and self-promotion under Cyrus, Cambyses and Darius.[218] That Xerxes too was moved by similar imperatives is suggested by the way his own inscriptions closely imitate the tropes and the imagery of his father's. This is the case, for example, with the representation of his beauty and physical prowess.[219] This is unlikely to have escaped the notice of Herodotus (and Aeschylus): in a well-known portrait of Xerxes later in Book 7, Herodotus adopts, and then twists almost to breaking point, the salient features of this discourse around the royal persona.[220]

The theme of revenge (which Herodotus also mentions in the context of Xerxes' speech to his court and war council at the beginning of Book 7) can be interpreted, then, at most as a form of cultural translation.[221] However, it could also be seen as an intentional distortion, presenting actions which, from the king's standpoint, were political imperatives, both a source of potential social and political capital and of considerable pressure, as outcomes of the irrational and impulsive aspects of Xerxes' character.

Revealing of the Persian ideological subtext behind Herodotus' account of Xerxes' thoughts and actions is the expansion of the lists of people/land (*dahayāva*) featuring in the king's inscriptions following the campaign against Greece.[222] In particular, the appearance of the mysterious 'Ākaufačiyā' in the Daiva Inscription (§ 3) has raised numerous questions. Under Xerxes' rule, no such territorial acquisitions are in fact attested in the surviving record to justify the inclusion of a new *dahaγāuš* in the royal lists.[223] If Ākaufačiyā should, as some have suggested, be identified with some (uncertain) eastern land (north-east India or, more likely, a territory located in the Gulf region), then its inclusion could be understood as a reference to further expansion to the east, the stage *par excellence* since the time of Cyrus on which to re-enact the empire's expansionist past.[224] Recently, Il'ja

[217] Wu 2014; see DNb §§ 11–12.

[218] Note Hdt. 7.8γ1–2, where Xerxes explicitly claims his greatest wish to be the extension of Persian power 'to the sky of Zeus', immediately after hammering home the point suggesting that, after the conquest of Greece, nothing shall border the empire, having made of the world one single space.

[219] See, by contrast, Aesch. *Pers.* 845–50, where Atossa worries about Xerxes' 'shameful garments' (ἀτιμίαν ἐσθημάτων).

[220] See Llewellyn-Jones 2015 on, quite literally, the body politics of the Achaemenid kings and compare Hdt. 7.187.1 with XPf on the one hand and, on the other, DNa.

[221] Cf. Hdt. 5.105.1–2, mentioned above: Xerxes tries to emulate and surpass Darius, as Persian imperial ideology requires, and fails.

[222] See Jacobs 2017: 30 for an overview of *dahaγāva* lists in the royal inscriptions changing over time.

[223] On Xerxes' reign, see Rollinger and Degen 2021c as well as Potts 2023: 458–62. See Huayna Ávila 2020 for a recent historical reappraisal of XPh. Degen 2024a stresses its purely ideological thrust.

[224] Jacobs 2017: 15–17; Callieri 2023: 859–60. For an (ancient) Indian location of Ākaufačiyā

Yakubovič argued in favour of reading the Daiva Inscription in explicitly political (and not religious) terms, as a reference to Greece.[225] Other scholars have stressed the more generally ideological (imperial) framework of the inscription: a 'mission accomplished' statement, aimed at emphasizing Xerxes' surpassing of Darius' record as king, given that the latter failed in Greece, while Xerxes (in his own account, at least) did not.[226]

The intentionality of Herodotus' engagement with this aspect of Xerxes' self-representation is suggested by two other episodes. In a celebrated speech from the Persian Council Scene of Book 7, Artabanus (Xerxes' uncle) overturns point by point the Great King's argument for invading Greece, recapitulating all the previous imperial campaigns from Cyrus onwards, emphasizing their failure, and criticizing the idea of further ventures both in the east and the west (7.18.2–3). What we see here is nothing less than the rebuttal, by one of the empire's most prominent representatives, of the entire rationale of Persia's history as a world power. Secondly, before the catastrophe of Salamis (which proves the wisdom of Artabanus' position, but too late), the memorable scene of the flogging of the Hellespont once again exposes the shaky foundations of the entire conceptual edifice of the Persian past.[227] This scene transforms a symbolic act of universal domination into an angry outburst of the wrath of an irresponsible madman – one who (as Aeschylus had already observed in the *Persians*) dares to unite what the divine order has sanctioned should remain apart.[228] Crossing a divinely set boundary (both a physical and a cosmic one), Xerxes condemns himself, his men and ultimately the empire he intended to expand further than anyone before him, to failure and doom.[229]

Imperial endgame: closing the *Histories*

Already in antiquity, many interpreters noted the Homeric quality of Herodotus' work.[230] This assessment is vindicated by the *Histories*' end. In a masterful, dizzying ring composition, the narrative thread returns to the point at which the entire history of Persia as an imperial power started: Cyrus (9.122.2–3). The king's prophetic warning on the dangers of uncontrolled expansionism has been subjected to scrutiny by countless scholars. Irwin recently suggested that the

(in modern Pakistan), see Llewellyn-Jones 2022: 261. However, note the scepticism, based on linguistic grounds, in Schmitt 2014: 128, who points out that *kauḍa* 'is typically a Western Iranian word'.

[225] This is a contested view, as Yakubovič himself admits (2023: 14–15).

[226] Yakubovič 2023. Compare Howe and Müller 2012 and Degen 2022a: 363–80 on Alexander's feats in the far east as an act of competitive engagement with Achaemenid claims of world rule.

[227] Hdt. 7.35, with Degen 2022d: 539.

[228] Cf. Aesch. *Pers.* 180–97 (Atossa's dream of Xerxes trying, unsuccessfully, to yoke two women to his chariot).

[229] Rollinger 2014b; Rollinger and Bichler 2017. For Atossa's dream about Xerxes' hubris see Aesch. *Pers.* 175–204. On Aeschylus' subversive use of Near Eastern imperial motifs, see van de Mieroop 2023: 212.

[230] Tuplin 2022.

episode is intended as a skilful and ominous narrative prolepsis adumbrating the fate of Athenian imperialism.[231] This interpretation is keen to give a 'presentist' reading to the entire episode, if not of Herodotus' work as a whole.[232] Such an interpretation has many strengths. At the same time, it may be that Herodotus has something else in mind: that is, again, a close confrontation with what is usually referred to as Achaemenid royal ideology, which I have narrowly characterized here as an articulate and pervasive memorialization of the past aimed at asserting the historical legitimacy of Persian imperial power.

Marc van de Mieroop has recently argued that the proliferation of local writing systems from the first millennium BC onwards (including Greek) developed in competition with, and in reaction against, the written culture of expanding Near Eastern empires: (Neo)Assyrian, Babylonian, Elamite and finally Persian. In this context, alphabetic writing helped represent the cultural identity and articulate the defence of the political ambitions of subject groups (Phoenicians, Israelites, Greeks) faced with Near Eastern imperial control.[233] According to van de Mieroop, alphabetic scripts served as tools of cultural and political resistance, which took shape in constant dialogue with the cuneiform tradition that continued to represent the most obvious and authoritative expression of ancient Near Eastern universal imperialism (think of the Achaemenid trilingual inscriptions).[234] The impact of the rise and consolidation of Persia as an imperial power can no longer be disputed, though scholars have only recently begun to appreciate its full extent and implications.[235] Given the elusive nature of the evidence at hand, when it comes to intellectual trends, a sound appreciation of the Teispid-Achaemenid Empire's legacy still struggles to gain the traction it deserves.[236] Scholars have effectively demonstrated the influence of Persian mental maps in constructing cartographic space across the Greek world.[237] Samantha Blankenship has gone a step further with her study of the 'chart' as an organizational category of individuals and resources: Greek historical writing, she has shown, gained momentum thanks to a complex and fruitful engagement with (and sometimes a creative (mis)understanding of) what she has termed 'the intellectual strategies of the Achaemenids for managing their empire and its past, present and future history'.[238]

The examples discussed here reinforce the core of Blankenship's argument but also show that it can be taken further: to encompass what we might tentatively term a distinctive Achaemenid theory, or philosophy, of history. The climactic scene in which Cyrus in a single breath disavows the fundamental assumptions of the entire imperial project he himself had initiated can legitimately be seen as

[231] See recently Irwin 2018 with references to previous literature. It remains contentious whether Herodotus witnessed the destruction of Athens' power in the Peloponnesian War.
[232] Irwin 2018.
[233] van de Mieroop 2023.
[234] Payen 1995 viewed Herodotus' literary work as a form of resistance (ethnographic expansion beyond the space claimed by the Great Kings as a counterclaim to their hegemonic ambitions).
[235] Rollinger 2023a.
[236] Brosius 2023.
[237] This tradition represents a culture-specific conventional system, as unequivocally demonstrated, for example, by research on Oceanian understandings of spatiality: Arnaud 2014.
[238] Blankenship 2022: 65.

the intellectual seal set on the masterpiece that is the *Histories*. By their author's own admission at the outset, the work's main aim had been to save from oblivion 'the great and marvellous deeds performed by Greeks and barbarians alike' (ἔργα μεγάλα τε καὶ θωμαστά, τὰ μὲν Ἕλλησι τὰ δὲ βαρβάροισι ἀποδεχθέντα, 1.1.1).[239]

As shrewdly noted by Oswyn Murray, Herodotus is, above all, a historian – and a very skilled manipulator – of the traditions (rather than the facts) that make up the *logoi* of his *Histories*.[240] This position, amply demonstrated in the case, for example, of Greek accounts of colonial foundation across the Mediterranean, is no less true of his approach to Persia – even if this is still often denied.[241] Such scepticism, however, is hard to sustain in the light of the available evidence. Some years ago, Rollinger discussed the representation of time (or what might be termed the Persian understanding of history) that is revealed by Achaemenid inscriptions. He interprets the progressive disappearance of chronological anchoring points from Bisutun onwards in terms of an explicit conceptualization of past and future alike. In his understanding, this is a consciously developed ideology of the 'end of history'.[242] Rollinger's suggestion is vindicated by recent studies that have pointed out how the definition of a single imperial temporality played a crucial role in the establishment of the political project initiated by Cyrus and the impact it had on the socio-political and cultural orders of subject peoples from the Aegean to Sogdiana. The standardization of a calendrical system, which might have begun with Bisutun, arguably played a significant part in the process.[243] From such a perspective, it is hardly a matter of chance, Rollinger has suggested, that 'the "Greek" enlightenment of the sixth century BC began not in Greece, but in the Persian Empire, at its outer western limits close to the border zone'.[244]

Such an intellectual revolution can be considered the ripest fruit of the Achaemenid imperial experience across the Mediterranean.[245] Herodotus, for whom the outermost western limits of the empire are likely to have been home, seems to have grasped the implications of Persian experimentation with the new imperial temporality. The *Histories* can be read as the first known monumental

[239] See Sahlins 2022: 124–73 on what he evocatively calls 'The Cosmic Polity'.

[240] Murray 2001: 317. Cf. already Burkert 1985 and Murray 1987, building upon Vansina 1973: 143–63.

[241] West 2003: 437; 2011.

[242] Rollinger 2013b. See already Finn 2011: 247 on A^{3}Pb and Hyland 2018: 1–15, who suggests that this strategy did not end with the reign of Xerxes but on the contrary can be taken as representative of Achaemenid thought as a whole.

[243] Kosmin 2018b recently suggested seeing the inscription as an imperial calendar. This hypothesis has been endorsed by Henkelman 2022: 452 n. 104. See furthermore Henkelman 2022: 452–8, with additional data from the Persepolis archive. Note that Kosmin's idea seems somewhat at odds with his overarching argument in Kosmin 2018a, namely that it is only under the Seleucids that time becomes a cultural and political weapon (in turn sparking resistance by means of subversive appropriation or mimicry, according to Bhabha 1994; Wagner 2021) in the hands of the empire. Both Blankenship 2022 and the evidence presented in this paper, on the contrary, suggest that the Achaemenids had already gone far down this path.

[244] Rollinger 2023b: 930.

[245] Rollinger 2023b: 931. A similar argument is developed in Beckwith 2023: 234–67, who casts aside the Persian Empire, however, harking back to its alleged (Scythian) predecessor in Central Eurasia.

account of a subversive reaction (an aural practice of resistance, echoing van de Mieroop) to the Persian cultural revolution.[246]

However elusive, the precedent of Hecataeus – who, by contrast, seems to have appropriated Persian intellectual devices to the ends of his aggrandizing self-staging as a wise man – stands to remind us that other outcomes were possible and that the one we find reflected in Herodotus' work was, in all likelihood, the result of a series of conscious choices.[247]

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[246] See Lincoln 2012: 375–406 for some thoughts on a (major) corollary of the present study, namely, the inbuilt tensions between the imperial goal of never-ending expansion (Richardson's presumptive claims) and (1) the historical reality where such a project does not succeed everywhere, and (2) the simultaneous official claim that the empire is already coterminous with the world. Mission accomplished: paradise restored, quite literally, end of the story (hence the inscriptional strategy adopted from Xerxes onwards).

[247] Giangiulio 2005 discusses what is perhaps the most explicit – but, as argued here, most likely by no means the only – example of Herodotus' proactive and conscious reshaping of originally conflicting traditional narratives concerning the tyranny of Cypselus and his heirs (5.92).

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