
REVIEW DISCUSSION

What Can We Know about Cambyses?

SCHWAB, Andreas, and Alexander SCHÜTZE (eds.). 2023. *Herodotean Soundings: The Cambyses Logos*. Tübingen: Narr Francke Attempto Verlag GmbH. €98.00. 9783823383291.

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In the *Histories*, Herodotus concentrates on the first four kings of the (Achaemenid) Persian Empire (550–330 BC); of these, the king we know the least about as an historical figure is Cambyses. This is perhaps not surprising, given that his reign of eight years (530–522) was by far the shortest of the four kings, each of whom otherwise reigned for over twenty years: Cambyses' father Cyrus II (559–530), Cambyses' successor Darius I (522–486) and Darius' son Xerxes (486–465). As with all periods of antiquity, we have only a fraction of the written and visual sources produced during the time of the early Persian kings; Cambyses' shorter reign likely resulted in the creation (and possible survival) of fewer such sources in the first place. The surviving ancient sources for him do not serve us well. No royal inscriptions from the Persian heartland in Iran are extant either for Cambyses or for his father, but we still have a relative wealth of other ancient sources informing us about Cyrus: Babylonian (especially the Cyrus Cylinder, commissioned by Cyrus himself), Hebrew, Greek and Persian (Cyrus' building programme at his capital Pasargadae). For Cyrus, we know enough about his life and reign to warrant a recent scholarly biography (Waters 2022); for Cambyses, no such biography is possible. The few royal inscriptions that have come down to us, such as the Apis bull epitaph from Saqqara in Egypt, do not reveal much about Cambyses' character as king. Our three main narrative sources for his reign – Darius I's Bisitun relief and inscription; the Egyptian dignitary Udjahorresnet's statue and inscription; and Herodotus' account, found mainly in Book 3 – draw incomplete and biased pictures of Cambyses. One thing we know about him for certain is his one great accomplishment: adding Egypt to the Persian Empire in 526 (or, more traditionally, 525).

So how effective could a deep dive into Herodotus' Cambyses *logos* be as a tool for exploring the historical Cambyses? Helping us to answer that question, at least in part, is Andreas Schwab and Alexander Schütze's edited collection, *Herodotean Soundings: The Cambyses Logos*. The volume grew out of a 2017 conference held in Heidelberg: 'Religion, Violence, and Interaction? An Interdisciplinary Approach to Herodotus' Narrative on Cambyses'. Schwab and Schütze explain that their collection has two main goals: one is to 'to offer selected and targeted "soundings" that deal with specific passages of the Herodotus text' on Cambyses (11) and another is to present readings of Herodotus' Cambyses *logos* that are multidisciplinary, bringing together scholars from Classics, Achaemenid studies, Egyptology, religious studies and more. Schwab and Schütze claim as model for the first goal Elizabeth Irwin and Emily Greenwood's edited collection, which focuses on Book 5 of the *Histories* as a connected *logos*, and for the second goal Thomas Harrison and Irwin's edited collection, which

takes a multidisciplinary approach to examine Herodotus' engagement with contemporary, fifth-century views of the Athenian Empire (9).¹ Overall, they are successful in accomplishing their stated goals and also in shedding new light on Cambyses. The collection's thirteen chapters are distributed into four parts: 'Part 1: Close Readings: Linguistic, Narratological and Philosophical Perspectives'; 'Part 2: The Cambyses *Logos* and Other Sources on the Conquest of Egypt'; 'Part 3: Geopolitical Dimensions of the Cambyses *Logos*'; 'Part 4: Cambyses and the Egyptian Temples'.

The chapters in Parts 2–4 in particular feature many historical insights into Cambyses and his actions as king. The chapters in Part 2 mostly consider ancient sources on his conquest of Egypt beyond Herodotus. In a helpful survey, Melanie Wasmuth ('Perception and Reception of Cambyses as Conqueror and King of Egypt: Some Fundamentals') divides such sources into three categories: primary (produced during Cambyses' time and in the Persian heartland/Egypt); secondary (produced either after Cambyses' time or outside of the Persian heartland/Egypt); and tertiary (produced both after Cambyses' time and outside of the Persian heartland/Egypt). The few surviving primary sources include the Apis epitaph; secondary sources include the Bisitun inscription and Udjahorresnet's statue/inscription; and tertiary sources include Herodotus. Schütze ('Cambyses the Egyptian? Remembering Cambyses and Amasis in Persian Period Egypt') notes that Cambyses may have tried to erase the memory of the Egyptian king (as Herodotus suggests with Cambyses' treatment of Amasis' mummy: 3.16), and in Egyptian inscriptions we often find Amasis' name erased. Reinhold Bichler ('A Comparative Look at the Post-Herodotean Cambyses') notes that in post-Herodotean Greek and Roman literature Cambyses' family (mother, sisters, brothers) have different names from those that Herodotus records, and the respective numbers of these family members can differ, too; both Ctesias and Hellanicus claim that Cambyses had two brothers and not just one (Smerdis, for Herodotus).

While three of the four chapters in Part 3 treat Cambyses' attack on the Ammonians, the outlier is Gunnar Sperveslage's 'On the Historical and Archaeological Background of Cambyses' Alliance with Arab Tribes (Hdt. 3.4–9)'. Sperveslage concludes that the Arabians who Herodotus states helped Cambyses cross the desert and invade Egypt were the northwest Arabian Qedarites, the same tribe that helped the seventh-century Assyrian king Esarhaddon cross the desert and invade Egypt. As Damien Agut-Labordère ('An "Ammonian Tale": Cambyses in the Egyptian Western Desert') points out, it is the Ammonians from Siwa who say that Cambyses' army, on its way to conquer Siwa, was swallowed up in a sandstorm, while Herodotus doubts the story (3.26). Herodotus conflates the Siwa Oasis (better known to Greeks) with the Dakhla Oasis (due west of Thebes), which was the real goal of Cambyses' army when it marched from Thebes. Not part of the conference but written in response to Agut-Labordère's chapter is Olaf E. Kaper's 'The Revolt of Petubastis IV during the Reigns of Cambyses and Darius'. Kaper argues that Cambyses' expedition into the Western Desert was intended to put down a rebellion based in the Dakhla Oasis led by Petubastis IV; the Persian

¹ Irwin and Greenwood 2007; Harrison and Irwin 2018.

army supposedly lost in the sandstorm was then defeated by Petubastis' army. In response to both Agut-Labordère's and Kaper's chapters, Schwab ('Pindaric "Arrows" in Herodotus: Ψάμμος (Hdt. 3.26): Just a Sandstorm or also a Rebel[lion]?') sees Herodotus engaging in wordplay both on the Ammonians as the 'sandy' (*psammos*) ones who defeat/swallow up Cambyses' troops, and on the Egyptian name Psammtik (borne by several Saite and rebel kings) and *psammos*. Schwab posits that Cambyses' troops may, in actual fact, have been defeated by a rebel king in the desert named Psamm(tik/os).

The three chapters in Part 4 look at Cambyses' destruction of Egyptian temples (a detail not reported by Herodotus). Dan'el Kahn ('Cambyses' Attitude towards Egyptian Temples in Contemporary Texts and Later Sources: A Reevaluation of the Persian Conquest of Egypt') holds that if we accept Joachim Friedrich Quack's argument for dating Cambyses' conquest of Egypt to 526, rather than to 525,² there would have been plenty of time for him to have accomplished essentially all the destructive acts attributed to him by Herodotus (from abusing Amasis' mummy to killing the Apis bull). Cambyses' destruction of Egyptian temples mentioned by post-Herodotean authors (e.g. Strabo and Pausanias), moreover, is consistent with the practice of ancient Near Eastern conquerors when putting down rebellions. Herodotus himself mixed up the Ethiopian (i.e. Kushite in Nubia) and Ammonian campaigns; for his part, Strabo (17.1.54) says the troops of Cambyses swallowed up in a sandstorm were marching against the Ethiopians, not the Ammonians. Herodotus' Ammonians may have actually been the people of Thebes, which had the biggest temple of Amun in Egypt; perhaps Thebes rebelled against Cambyses and had to be punished. Fabian Wespí ('Cambyses' Decree and the Destruction of Egyptian Temples') provides texts and translations of the Cambyses decree, which is found in two versions on two different papyri; this decree limits governmental contributions (silver, geese, barley, etc.) to Egyptian temples. Quack ('Cambyses and the Sanctuary of Ptah') examines Cambyses' mockery of the dwarf-like statue of Hephaestus (Ptah) in Memphis (Hdt. 3.37). Quack observes that Ptah of Memphis sometimes appears as a dwarf in Egyptian texts and that amulets of Ptah as dwarf were popular Egyptian imports in the Levant (and even show up in eighth- and seventh-century Greece). The best chapter in the collection is its last: Quack grounds Cambyses' mockery of the statue of Hephaestus/Ptah in Egyptian and Phoenician realia and leaves the reader with a better idea of what this episode is all about; the chapter reaches the illuminating, multidisciplinary heights achieved by what may be the best chapter in Harrison and Irwin's collection, where Robert Rollinger details the Near Eastern precedents behind Herodotus' story about Darius I's neighing horse (3.84–9).³

Although we have thus far discussed what the collection can tell us about the historical Cambyses, one of its most valuable aspects is its discussion of ancient sources on this king. The three philologically centred chapters in Part 1 analyse Herodotus as an historical source on Cambyses; they explore how Herodotus as an author shapes the Cambyses *logos* to fit his various narrative and thematic agendas. Irwin ('Just Who Is Cambyses? Imperial Identities and Egyptian Campaigns') argues

² Quack 2011; cf. Depuydt 1996.

³ See Rollinger 2018.

that Herodotus leads readers to identify themselves with the Cambyses in his text by focalizing action through Cambyses' eyes. Herodotus shapes his portrayal to comment on Athenian imperialism: Cambyses is 'mad', just as ancient critics often accused the Athenian imperialistic *dēmos* of 'madness', and Cambyses invaded Egypt, just as the Athenians did (c. 450). For Anna Bonifazi ('Herodotus' Verbal Strategies to Depict Cambyses' Abnormality'), Herodotus uses non-verbal communication (e.g. his laughter) to point to Cambyses' abnormality (his madness), while using verbal communication, especially by Herodotus as narrator, to point to normality; only at his death does Cambyses become verbal and logical. According to Anthony Ellis ('Relativism in Herodotus: Foreign Crimes and Divinities in the *Inquiry*'), Herodotus criticizes Cambyses as 'mad' for mocking Egyptian religious beliefs because, in Herodotus' view, each culture's religious beliefs should be respected. As a cultural relativist, though, Herodotus is not perfectly consistent: he criticizes the Babylonian custom of sacred prostitution as 'most shameful' (1.199.1).

Delving into the state of our knowledge about Cambyses' life and reign is not a main goal for Schwab and Schütze's collection, but this volume is still a testament both to the dearth of accurate knowledge about Cambyses and to the limitations of our sources on Cambyses such as Herodotus' *Histories*. Even with the enlightening contributions found therein, our picture of Cambyses as an historical figure remains disappointingly unclear.

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