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## REVIEW DISCUSSION

### The Personality of Cambyses, King of Kings

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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The astute reader will recognize in the title of this essay an allusion to a seminal study on Xerxes by Heleen Sancisi-Weerdenburg, first published in 1989. In it, she argued that the conventional depiction of Xerxes as an emotional, impulsive and hubristic womanizer arose from an uncritical reading of Herodotus, which in turn was used to interpret other forms of evidence, such as Persian royal inscriptions or the building programme at Persepolis. In her view,

Xerxes, like the other characters in the *Histories*, are pieces on Herodotus' chessboard that he moves according to the rules, but the resulting game is Herodotus' own. To extend this metaphor, we might ask which are Herodotus' pieces, what are the rules of the game and what moves does he make to obtain the desired result.<sup>1</sup>

The contributors to this superb interdisciplinary collection of papers ask these same questions about Cambyses, with impressive results.

Despite his short reign (530–522), Cambyses, like Xerxes, has been much maligned in traditional historiography, even though it has long been recognized that Herodotus' account cannot be taken at face value. Indeed, one still sees, for example, efforts to prove that Cambyses could have killed the Apis bull.<sup>2</sup> Even sober treatments of his reign use Herodotus as a basis for assessing his mindset, such as: 'Herodotus' report of ensuing disasters due to insufficient preparations probably indicates that Cambyses was less interested in the campaign in strategic and logistical terms than in political terms'.<sup>3</sup>

The contributions to this volume, however, demonstrate that such thinking must become a thing of the past. It is now abundantly clear that Herodotus' account of the reign of Cambyses is not a straightforward historical narrative. Rather, it is part of a highly literary work that advances various arguments organized around the theme of the Persian Wars. As Bonifazi puts it, 'Herodotean history is governed by discourse, rather than discourse being governed by history' (93 n. 2). Irwin is even more strident, declaring:

<sup>1</sup> Sancisi-Weerdenburg 1989: 553.

<sup>2</sup> Jansen-Winkel 2002: 314–15.

<sup>3</sup> Ruzicka 2012: 21.

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With this analysis of Cambyses' *logos* the gauntlet is thrown down for those who want to use the *Histories* as a historical source for the period it ostensibly depicts, seeing Herodotus as a historian attempting only to give the most accurate and straightforward account of the past that he can, coping (in vain) with the limitations of the sources available to him and influenced by 'folktale motifs' to fill in the inevitable gaps. (84)

This is not to say that Herodotus' account is entirely fictitious, but rather that his inclusion of any particular detail must be considered in light of the purpose it serves for his literary aims. These may include critiquing contemporary Athenian society (Irwin), presenting his own form of historical inquiry as rational and robust (Bonifazi), advocating for cultural but not moral relativism (Ellis) and using Pindaric allusions to create a deliberately ambiguous picture of Cambyses' expedition into the Western Desert (Schwab). And this is also true of later writers who found Herodotus' depiction of Cambyses suitable to their literary needs (Bichler; Kahn).

Egyptian texts, too, have goals other than the objective documentation of Cambyses' reign. Many are simply not interested in Cambyses per se, but rather in the office of pharaoh, whosoever holds that position (Wasmuth; Schütze). Such texts would arguably not be any different, save for royal names and titles, had Cambyses never conquered Egypt and had Psamtik III instead remained in power. In other words, their content was dictated by ritual context far more than by contemporary events. When such events do play a role, such as in petitions, literary compositions or even acts of *damnatio memoriae*, they generally work against Cambyses because Darius had a vested interest in depicting his predecessor in a negative light (Schütze). There is no need to presume hostility on the part of the Egyptians (though surely there was some), as Darius is an obvious major source for it. Indeed, there are relatively few Egyptian texts actually from the reign of Cambyses (Wasmuth); most are later and presumably coloured by Darius' attitude.

The question remains, then, what do we actually know about Cambyses? While it is probably too ambitious to speak of his 'personality', some general impressions of his aptitude as a ruler emerge from this volume. First, his alliance with the Qedarite Arabs (Hdt. 3.4–9) in preparation for the invasion of Egypt betokens a degree of forethought not usually attributed to Cambyses. Like the Assyrians under Esarhaddon a century and half earlier, he secured the cooperation of the tribe controlling the major water resources in the Negev and the Sinai Peninsula (Sperveslage). The bowl from the Tell el-Maskhuta hoard, now in the Brooklyn Museum, naming the Qedarite king Qaynu, son of Gashmu, suggests that this alliance endured throughout the fifth century, and that the Persians may have employed the Qedarites to maintain control of the eastern Nile Delta in much the same way as they employed Jews and Aramaeans at Elephantine. Thus it was not only an instance of logistical expertise on the part of Cambyses, but an important (and lasting) political achievement as well.

Secondly, Cambyses' expedition into the Western Desert (Hdt. 3.26) likely served an important strategic purpose. The objective was to subdue the 'Ammonians', that is, the inhabitants of the Dakhla and Siwa oases. The reason for

the expedition could have been to confront the pretender Petubastis IV, whose cartouche has been found on the remains of a temple at Amheida in the Dakhla Oasis (Kaper), though Uzume Wijnsma has convincingly argued that this revolt was against Darius c. 521.<sup>4</sup> Instead, Cambyses' expedition must either have been directed towards a different rebel (Schwab) or securing a region that controlled access to Libya and points west (Agut-Labordère). Herodotus' account of the destruction of this expedition by a sandstorm need not be taken as an indication of its defeat. As Agut-Labordère ingeniously argues, this account is probably a conflation of Egyptian and Cyrenaean sources. The Egyptian source recounts the expedition's departure from Thebes and its ten-day journey across the desert to Dakhla. Since the expedition then headed north towards Bahariya and Siwa, it did not return to Thebes, hence its 'disappearance' in the Egyptian source. The Cyrenaean source claims that the Persians did not succeed in conquering the Ammonians or Libya (cf. Hdt. 4.203), since by Herodotus' day Cyrene was no longer under Achaemenid rule and the Cyrenaeans were at pains to dispel any notion of collusion with the Persians, especially to a fellow Greek, in the decades following the Persian Wars. The actual success or failure of Cambyses' expedition is impossible to determine from the available evidence, but there is no good reason to consider it the ill-conceived disaster it is often portrayed to be.

Thirdly, Cambyses' measures to reallocate state financial support from certain Egyptian temples suggest nothing other than a concern for good fiscal management. Simply put, Cambyses stopped direct payments in kind from royal coffers and replaced them with expanded landholdings under temple control (Wespi). The reason for this change is uncertain, though Wespi's (365) suggestion that it related to the costs of imperial garrisons and administration is a reasonable one (cf. Hdt. 3.91.2). More importantly, however, enacting these measures, including the exemptions for three specific temples, implies close attention to the intricacies of both royal and temple finances in Egypt. This bean-counting Cambyses is a far cry from the incautious and insane Cambyses of Herodotus.

Finally, some of the sources for Cambyses may perhaps be pressed a little further (cf. Quack). For example, although Wasmuth (170–1) rightly characterizes the statue of Udjahorresnet in the Vatican as a secondary source, its inscription portrays Cambyses as a pious Egyptian pharaoh, aware of and receptive to local religious traditions.<sup>5</sup> This is especially noteworthy as Darius, whom Udjahorresnet also served and in whose reign the inscription's text was composed, had every reason to treat Cambyses as illegitimate (Schütze). Udjahorresnet thus could gain no political advantage in representing Cambyses in this way; in fact, the opposite was probably true. Moreover, this depiction accords with some of the primary sources adduced by Wasmuth (166–7), namely the texts from the Serapeum referencing the funeral of the Apis bull. Whether this was a canny political move on the part of Cambyses or the result of a genuinely held religious view, it is nothing like the behaviour of Herodotus' Cambyses.

Similarly, as Irwin (34–7) demonstrates, Herodotus, in his discussion of the potential reasons for Cambyses' invasion of Egypt (3.1–3), manipulates the

<sup>4</sup> See Wijnsma 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Stevens 2020.

reader into accepting the first version as authoritative, but offers no substantive objections to the other two. Irwin argues that this is a device to insert the reader into a Persian viewpoint by making him or her press on with the invasion of Egypt without reflecting too much on the justification for it. But there are other ways to read this passage. Many years ago, Mabel Lang argued that underlying these three versions was a diplomatic marriage between the Persian and Egyptian royal houses.<sup>6</sup> Nitetis ('Neith has come') is a genuine Egyptian name and quite apt for a princess of the Saite Dynasty, whose hometown was a major centre for the worship of Neith.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the cylinder seal of Artystone, daughter of Cyrus and wife of Darius (Hdt. 3.88.2), is preserved in impressions on the tablets of the Persepolis Fortification Archive. The vividly Egyptianizing imagery of this seal has led Margaret Cool Root to suggest that Artystone was the offspring of this diplomatic marriage between Cyrus and Nitetis.<sup>8</sup> If so, Herodotus' third version of the reason for the invasion, that Cambyses' mother Cassandane was jealous of the favour Cyrus showed to Nitetis, is effectively a dramatization of an historical moment, one which served Herodotus' literary needs. Returning to Sancisi-Weerdenburg's chessboard metaphor, the moves are certainly Herodotus', but in this case the pieces are not.

All told, the evidence for the reign of Cambyses in Herodotus and the various Egyptian sources does not indicate that he was especially sacrilegious, deranged or vindictive, or even particularly impulsive. Of course, there is no doubt that the invasion of Egypt caused death, destruction and trauma; all invasions do. But the evidence is suggestive of a competent and capable monarch, possessed of political, logistical, financial and religious acumen. This conclusion owes much to the tremendous efforts and keen analyses of the contributors to this important volume, which surely will remain the definitive treatment of the Cambyses *logos* for years to come.

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<sup>6</sup> Lang 1972.

<sup>7</sup> Vittmann 2011: 393.

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