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REVIEW DISCUSSION

Of Kings, Minds and (Hi)stories

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 526, after succeeding Cyrus II to the Persian throne, Cambyses invaded and conquered Egypt. From that point until 404, Egypt was integrated into the Persian Empire as its sixth satrapy. Though not the only one, the so-called Cambyses *logos* by Herodotus (3.1–66) is one of the most significant sources on the Persian conquest of Egypt in 526. In popular culture, this section of the *Histories* has long been highly influential, particularly in its portrayal of Cambyses as a mad despot who showed no respect for Egypt's millennia-old culture. A notable example is the song 'L'armata perduta di Re Cambise' by the Italian rapper Murubutu, which provides an extraordinary and enjoyable synthesis of Herodotus' account.

In academic circles, the Cambyses *logos* has garnered attention from experts across various fields, including Classicists, Egyptologists and Iranologists. The edited volume reviewed and discussed here (henceforth *HS*) offers an extensive and detailed analysis of Herodotus' narrative, aiming both to enhance understanding of the text and to assess its value in relation to other surviving sources.

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HS is subdivided into four parts, as follows: 'Close Readings: Linguistic, Narratological and Philosophical Perspectives' (23–150); 'The Cambyses *Logos* and Other Sources on the Conquest of Egypt' (151–260); 'Geopolitical Dimensions of the Cambyses *Logos*' (261–324); and 'Cambyses and the Egyptian Temples' (325–90).

The first part engages directly with the Cambyses *logos* from various perspectives. Elizabeth Irwin argues that Herodotus' narrative draws a parallel between Cambyses and the Athenians, as both pursued imperialistic ambitions in Egypt: Cambyses in 526 and the Athenians in the mid-fifth century during the so-called *megalē strateia*, when Athens lost all of its warships in Egypt attempting to support the rebellion led by Inaros, a Libyan minor king who claimed the Egyptian throne against Persia (25–92). Anna Bonifazi lists and analyses the strategies Herodotus deploys to depict Cambyses as abnormal, including the use of deictic expressions to introduce gruesome details, an emphasis on Cambyses' verbal and non-verbal irrationality and the use of negations to highlight deviations from the norm (93–108). Anthony Ellis investigates Herodotus' cultural relativism, which is most prominently displayed in the *logoi* regarding Egypt (109–49).

The second part focuses on other sources related to Cambyses' conquest of Egypt. Melanie Wasmuth provides an exhaustive and sophisticated typology of these sources (153–85). Alexander Schütze explores historical memories of Egypt under Persian rule, suggesting that Cambyses may have encouraged anti-Amasis traditions – Amasis being the pharaoh in power when the Persians decided to invade Egypt – while Darius, who succeeded Cambyses following a palace coup, may have promoted anti-Cambyses traditions (187–235). Reinhold Bichler examines later classical authors, concentrating on possible instances of reception and reinterpretation of Herodotus' narrative (237–60).

The third part is more historical than historiographical, as it situates Cambyses' conquest of Egypt within the broader geopolitical context of the Eastern Mediterranean. Gunnar Sperveslage provides historical and archaeological background on Cambyses' alliance with the Arabs on the eve of the Persian invasion of Egypt, concluding that Herodotus' account (3.4–9) is entirely reliable in this regard (263–81). The remaining papers are otherwise concerned with Cambyses' campaign against the Ammonians, which followed the invasion of Egypt and culminated in the Persian army being swallowed by a sandstorm (3.17, 3.25.3 and 3.26). Damien Agut-Labordère argues that this 'Ammonian tale' refers to Cambyses' attempt to gain control over the oases west of the Nile (283–95). In contrast, Olaf E. Kaper suggests that the 'Ammonian tale' relates to Cambyses' efforts to suppress the revolt of the pharaoh Petubastis IV, who was ultimately defeated by Darius (297–303). Andreas Schwab builds on Kaper's thesis, proposing that the sandstorm story may serve as a metaphor for a military catastrophe suffered by Cambyses at the hands of a king named Psammos (305–23). Schwab also notes that this name evokes both Psammetichus, the founder of the dynasty that ruled Egypt before the Persian invasion, and the Greek word ψάμμος ('sand').

The fourth and last part provides Egyptological background on the Cambyses *logos*. Dan'el Kahn offers a thoughtful and measured reconstruction of the Persian invasion of Egypt, incorporating all available sources (327–49). Fabian Wespi examines the papyrological attestations of the so-called Decree of Cambyses, which entailed reducing and cancelling state donations to Egyptian temples, despite the expansion of the temples' estates (351–69). Joachim F. Quack focuses on Hdt. 3.37, concluding that this passage is more reliable than commonly assumed (371–90).

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Each essay in *HS* is thought-provoking and makes a significant contribution to the literature. However, the connection between 'Psammetichus' and the Greek word ψάμμος suggested by Andreas Schwab is particularly intriguing to me, as it aligns with observations I have made in my own research.[1]

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[1] See Piccolo 2023: 59–60, with bibliography.

‘Psammetichus’ is most often transcribed as *Psmṯk* in hieroglyphic script and as *Psmṯk* or *P3-s-*[*n*-]*mṯk* in Demotic script. The latter orthography is noteworthy, as it provides compelling evidence that ‘Psammetichus’ is not of Egyptian origin but rather Nubian or, more plausibly, Libyan. The demotic rendering *P3-s-*(*n*-)*mṯk*, which translates to ‘the man/vendor of mixed wine’, is a clear example of *Volksetymologie* (‘popular etymology’), a phenomenon that occurs when a word from one language is reinterpreted within the phonological, morphological and semantic frameworks of another. In sum, it is evident that the ancient Egyptians perceived ‘Psammetichus’ as a foreign term and subsequently adapted it to fit their linguistic conventions.

The key question concerns the sound value of the sign conventionally transliterated as *ṯ* in both *Psmṯk* and *P3-s-*(*n*-)*mṯk*. In my view, this sign does not represent a dental consonant like /t/, as seen in the Greek forms Ψαμμήτιχος (Ionic) and Ψαμ(μ)άτιχος (Doric), but rather a palatal consonant. Two compelling pieces of evidence support this view. First, the Egyptian word *mṯk* (‘mixed wine’) becomes **ⲙⲟⲩϫϭ** in Coptic, where the Egyptian *ṯ* transforms into the Coptic **ϫ** (/tʃ/), a letter that represents a specific palatal sound depending on the dialect. Second, attestations of ‘Psammetichus’ in other ancient languages provide additional insights. Besides the Greek forms Ψαμμήτιχος/Ψαμ(μ)άτιχος, ‘Psammetichus’ appears as *Pi-sa-mi-is-ki* in Neo-Babylonian, where the Egyptian *ṯ* corresponds to the Neo-Babylonian *s*; as *Pismaśk*/*Psmaśk* in Carian, where the Egyptian *ṯ* corresponds to the Carian *ś*; and as פסמשך in Imperial Aramaic, where the Egyptian *ṯ* corresponds to the Imperial Aramaic **ש**. Thus, speakers of Neo-Babylonian, Carian and Imperial Aramaic likely perceived the Egyptian *ṯ* of *Psmṯk*/*P3-s-*(*n*-)*mṯk* as a sound similar to /s/ or /ʃ/.

So, why did the Greeks reinterpret *Psmṯk*/*P3-s-*(*n*-)*mṯk* as containing a /t/ sound (= τ)? My hypothesis is that a form of *Volksetymologie* occurred. The Greeks may have reinterpreted *Psmṯk*/*P3-s-*(*n*-)*mṯk* as a combination of the word ψάμματα (‘fragments’, or more likely ‘sand grains’) and the suffix -ιχος, or possibly as a combination of ψάμμη (Ionic) or ψάμμα (Doric), a feminine variant of ψάμμος, and the suffix -ιχος, with the intrusion of the element -τ-.[2]

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The so-called *Cambyses Romance*[3] is a fragmentary work of Coptic literature of uncertain date. Alongside Herodotus and other classical authors, this ‘novel’ is one of the few narrative texts concerning the Persian invasion of Egypt in 526. It is therefore surprising that *HS* does not engage with the *Cambyses Romance* at all, except for a brief reference on pages 163–4. Here is a synopsis: the Persian king Cambyses sends a letter to the ‘those who are in the place of the rising of the sun’ (**ⲛⲉⲧϣⲟⲟⲡ ϩⲛ̂-ⲙ̂ⲙⲁ-ⲛ̂ϣⲁ ⲙⲡⲣⲏ**, possibly Levantines, including Judaeans?), urging them to betray Egypt and submit to Persia. They refuse. Confounded by such a response, Cambyses is advised to take Egypt by deceit and invites the Egyptians to a feast and celebration in honour of the pharaoh and the god Apis. In doing so, he hopes to be recognized by the Egyptians as their master. Nonetheless, the Egyptians do not fall into the trap; ready for battle, they muster in arms before their trembling pharaoh, Apries. Unfortunately, the end of the tale is unknown.

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[2] On this latter onomastic pattern, see Kanavou 2020: 199–200, with bibliography.

[3] Buzi (forthcoming).

In addition to the aforementioned anachronism – Apries ruled Egypt from 589 to 570 – it is noteworthy that in the 'novel', Cambyses is frequently referred to as Nebuchadnezzar (ⲛⲁⲃⲟⲩⲭⲟⲇⲟⲛⲟⲥⲟⲣ), and the Persians are called 'the Assyrians' (ⲛⲁⲥⲥⲩⲣⲓⲟⲥ). Various sources, primarily the Bible, indicate that Nebuchadnezzar II, who ruled the Neo-Babylonian Empire from 605 to 562 and destroyed Jerusalem in 587/6, had repeated conflicts with Egypt over control of the Levant. During the civil war between Apries and Amasis in 567/6 – which resulted in Amasis' victory and his subsequent ascension to the Egyptian throne – the Babylonians may have invaded Egypt, either to reinstate Apries, as many Egyptologists have suggested (e.g. *HS*: 219), or to support Amasis, as argued more convincingly by Ivan A. Ladynin.[4] Furthermore, it is notable that the Assyrians, who invaded Egypt twice in 671 and 667/6 under Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal, respectively, are consistently referred to as Persians in Demotic literature.

A question therefore arises: is it possible that when Herodotus was in Egypt, he encountered stories of the Persian invasion of 526 in a context where memories of all past invasions from the East were somewhat blended together? After all, the ancient Egyptian mentality seemed prone to merging traumatic events into a single account. This amalgamation appears to have occurred with the Hyksos Period (1759–1539), whose traumatic memories were eventually conflated with those of the equally dramatic Amarna heresy (1353–1336).[5] If this 'mental mixture' was indeed a factor, it could explain the many discrepancies between the Cambyses *logos* and other sources (both textual and archaeological) regarding the Persian invasion of Egypt in 526. Interestingly, some of the essays in *HS* draw parallels between the invasion of Egypt by Cambyses and earlier invasions of the country, namely those by the Assyrians and Babylonians.

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I will now address the final remarks of Quack's essay, which will allow me to reflect on the position of scholarship of antiquity within historical studies and, more broadly, within the social sciences. When discussing Herodotus' account of Cambyses' madness and the general cautious scepticism of modern scholars regarding this matter, Quack writes:

> We have become accustomed to doubting ancient historians' reports about mad rulers and their perpetrations. But if we apply the same approach to modern history, would historians in 2000

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[4] Ladynin 2007.

[5] See Assmann 2023: 51–61.

> years not be wide off the mark when discussing the dictators of the 20th century CE (or some presidents of the 21st century)? (383–4)

This suggests that wars, genocides and other atrocities are ultimately brought about by sadistic and insane individuals in positions of leadership. However, I find this notion hard to countenance, both as an academic argument and politically. History is complex, and historical events often have multiple causes, with 'material conditions' frequently playing a key role.[6] While a leader's mental state is undoubtedly important, it is difficult to diagnose and evaluate within a broader context and thus hardly conceivable as a primary cause. To put it bluntly, the Shoah was not merely an outburst of irrationality from a demented tyrant but also an extreme outcome of traditional European liberalism.[7] Moreover, in some schools of management, Nazi methods are still 'praised' for their alleged scientific efficiency.[8] Additionally, the Nazi Party's rise to power was rooted in both the Treaty of Versailles[9] and the economic austerity measures implemented in Germany after the First World War.[10]

As for the implications for politics, it is too easy to blame heinous deeds on the lunacy of monarchs, dictators and presidents, as it unburdens communities, including the academic community, of their responsibilities. As historians, we must first and foremost comprehend both ancient and modern complexities – needless to say, comprehending does not mean justifying. This is the only way we have to prevent history repeating itself.[11]

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[6] For more on the economic factors behind contemporary wars, see Brancaccio 2024.

[7] Losurdo 2005.

[8] Chapoutot 2021.

[9] Keynes 1920.

[10] Galofré-Vilà et al. 2021.

[11] Bloch 1949.

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