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An Ideology of Loyalty: Reflections on Herodotus Book III*

Abstract

The last years of Cambyses' reign are marked by the extension of Achaemenid rule to Egypt and the prolonged absence of the king and his ministers from the Persian heartlands. Reliable subordinates were obviously essential to the smooth functioning of the Empire, and the role played by Prexaspes, whom Herodotus describes as pre-eminent in loyalty (3.30.3), illustrates what might be required of highly placed officials if the charisma of kingship, the cement that held the Empire together, was to be preserved. Prexaspes' activity imposes unity on a series of episodes illustrating his unfailing competence in the service of an unbalanced autocrat, and his end brings commendation from Herodotus (3.75.3). An Assyrian counterpart is offered by the story of the wise counsellor Ahiqar, first attested in an Aramaic text from the latter part of the fifth century BC and subsequently translated into a wide range of languages; the tale of Ahiqar's vicissitudes provides a framework for an assemblage of moral precepts, emphasising loyalty to the sovereign as a religious duty and offering advice to the ambitious. Under Darius self-sacrificing loyalty inspires the extraordinary expedient by which Zopyrus contrives the reduction of the rebellious city of Babylon (3. 150–160). While the narrative of the means by which this was achieved is absurd, it brings out the importance under Darius of incentives to dedicated service, above all the hope of winning recognition from a ruler who could express his appreciation on an extraordinarily generous scale. Merit awards did not depend on whim or haphazard observation; it is significant that Herodotus reports (8.90.4) the presence of scribes recording details of distinguished service at the battle of Salamis. But the list of those termed the King's benefactors,

* This paper was originally written for a conference held at the University of Tartu in June 2007, organised by Professor Thomas Kämmerer, Dr Mait Kõiv, and Professor Anne Lill on 'Ideologies in the Ancient East – Mediterranean: comparative approaches'. It was a most stimulating and enjoyable occasion, generating a sense of optimism and common purpose among scholars with very diverse interests. Though it was disappointing that the papers could not be collected for publication in a single volume, I welcome the opportunity to thank the organizers again.

orosangai (8.85.3), was clearly liberal as to the kinds of activity deemed to qualify for such recognition. To Greeks dedication to the ideology represented by the Persian Empire might seem to entail a distortion of normal values while its rewards appeared rather questionable to those who did not appreciate the advantages of the strong centralized rule which prevented disintegration into lawless tribalism.

Keywords

Darius, Cambyses, Herodotus, Egypt, Ahiqar, Wisdom literature, Zopyrus, Solon, Croesus, mutilation, Babylon.

This paper's topic was suggested by consideration of the role of the Persian courtier Prexaspes, to whom Herodotus assigns a leading part in his account of Cambyses' reign and the time of troubles that led to the accession of Darius. Prexaspes' activity unifies the narrative,[1] and though his counterpart is barely imaginable in a Hellenic context, Herodotus presents him as in many ways an exemplary figure, who wholeheartedly subordinates his own interests to those of the Empire, and this is the more remarkable when we consider how many of those who play major roles in Herodotus' narrative appear as opportunistic and devious. Certainly those presented as the leading figures in the Greek victory over Persia, Themistocles and Pausanias, do not serve as examples of selfless dedication to some common good (particularly if we remember what Thucydides tells us of their postwar careers (1.128–38), on which, significantly, Herodotus is silent). What may we infer about the training and motivation of those who made the administration and the army function as they should in creating the prosperity in which a ruler might urge his subjects to see the work of Ahura Mazda, 'the great god, who created man, who created happiness for man' as Darius' inscriptions reiterate?

Within the relatively small, autonomous communities of the city states of fifth-century mainland Greece the respect (or contempt) of fellow-citizens counted for much; material rewards were relatively modest. Herodotus' account (1.30.3–5) of Tellus the Athenian, Solon's nominee for first place in 'happiness', ὀλβιώτατος, culminates in a glorious death in battle when he was already a grandfather, and thus could feel reasonably confident of the continuance of his line. Public honours bring him a place in the memory of future generations beyond the family circle. Pericles' Funeral Speech, as reported by Thucydides (2.35–46) reflects similar values: it is a privilege to serve such a city. Of course, Greek

[1] My discussion is heavily indebted to David Asheri's commentary (1990); English translation in Asheri, Lloyd, Corcella 2007: 379–542. I have also found very helpful Aly 1921: 86–88; Szabo 1951–1952: 75–89 (esp. 76–80); Reinhardt 1962: esp. 344–347; Flory 1978; Gaiser 1984; Lang 1992.

city states differed greatly from one another. We must beware of athenocentrism; it is all too easy to treat Athens, about which we are particularly well informed, as a norm. But we all recognize that winning the good opinion of others in small, gossipy communities is, in general, a powerful incentive. The relative openness of the Greek polis is crucial. A strong, centralized autocracy like the Persian Empire could not work on similar principles. It needed intelligent and hard-working servants, prepared to be self-effacing.

Whatever we make of Herodotus' catalogues, the logistics of the Persian Wars demanded highly sophisticated administrators. How seriously should we take Herodotus' tales of the Persian Court? Do they provide valuable even if somewhat distorted snapshots of the workings of the power whose bureaucratic expertise we see documented in the tablets from Persepolis? Is there a large element of speculation? If so, should we see a widely accepted Hellenic conception or the product of Herodotus' creative imagination working on scanty data? Anyone bold enough to attempt to deal with these issues, and I am not, needs to be cautious, in particular in retrojecting details from a later period. What Herodotus offers represents a significant part of Greek conceptions of Persian life at the top.

Cyrus had been able to take over and adapt administrative structures and conventions developed by the Assyrians, including an education system which provided the training in literacy and numeracy essential to the running of the Empire. But whereas Asshurbanipal took pride in his competence in subjects which called for long hours in the classroom, these are no part of Darius' vision of the qualities required of a ruler. In an inscription from the façade of his tomb at Naqs-e Rustam he describes himself as a good commander and horseman, skilled with bow and spear (*DNb*). He could take for granted the availability of men with appropriate training to deal with documentation, calculation, and record-keeping, and from this group would be drawn those with whom Greeks and other foreigners with official business had to deal. Language problems ought not to be ignored, but we can only guess how far basic Aramaic was widely current at the time when Egypt was added to the Persian Empire and the extent to whch boys who showed some linguistic aptitude were trained as interpreters.[2]

Cambyses succeeded Cyrus in 530.[3] Herodotus relates what he regards as the most persuasive of many reports regarding Cyrus' death (1.214.5), setting it on his campaign against the Massagetae in Sogdiana. Xenophon (*Cyr.*8.7) has him die in his own bed in Persia, attended by family members, friends, and high officials; that may seem too good to be true, and many other tales were told.[4] We might have expected the king's funeral to have a widespread

[2] Herodotus describes a system established under Psammetichus for training Egyptian boys in Greek (2.154.2), but we do not know how long this lasted or whether such formal arrangements extended to other languages.

[3] All dates are BC unless otherwise stated.

[4] Further details in Asheri ad loc.

impact, particularly if he died far from Persia. Uncertainty on a point of such importance suggests that in 530 the imperial power seemed very remote to the Asia Minor Greeks who lived under its rule.

Herodotus' narrative concentrates on the subjugation of Egypt and the last three years of Cambyses' reign, when the Empire was being governed from Memphis. This is to be understood as the setting for Herodotus' tales of the court, the fascination of which distracts us from the scantiness of his account of the process by which Egypt was brought within the Persian Empire.[5] The image of Cambyses as an unhinged autocrat belongs to this Egyptian period, and Egyptian resentment of Persian rule must be allowed to have contributed to its creation. Prexaspes is introduced in the context of the deterioration in Cambyses' mental condition which Herodotus, citing Egyptian sources, associates with the king's assault on the Apis bull (3.30.1). Prexaspes looks like an authentic Persian name, a compound in *–aspa*, like *–ippos* in Greek; the first part of the name must have made Herodotus' audience[6] think of πρήσσω., but it is not clear what is the underlying Persian form. Cambyses is made to play on the name (3.62.3), and we shall come to associate Prexaspes with intelligent action; he does not simply offer advice. Another Prexaspes, perhaps his nephew, appears later (7.97) among the officers of Xerxes' fleet.

We now learn that Cambyses had a brother, whom Herodotus calls Smerdis.[7] It may surprise us that Herodotus does not give the name in the form used by Aeschylus, Mardos (*Pers.* 774), which is nearer to Old Persian *Bardiya*. This brother had originally accompanied Cambyses on the Egyptian campaign, but was sent back to Persia because Cambyses resented his superior competence in handling the bow sent by the Ethiopian king, a gift heavily loaded with symbolic importance (cf. 3.21.3). Cambyses dreamed that a messenger came to him from Persia and told him that Smerdis sat on the royal throne and touched the heaven with his head. We might find it surprising that he had not been left in Persia

[5] The implications of systematic royal nomadism and the lack of a fixed base for the Persian court are often overlooked, but we must wonder how much documentation went astray, or was simply unavailable when it was wanted. There is something extraordinarily modern in the problems of laying hands on the right paperwork in Ezra's account of the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem (*Ezra* 3–6); we note that a document supposedly deposited in the royal archives in Babylon was actually found in Ecbatana.

[6] 'Audience' rather than 'readers'. Whether or not we believe the tradition that Herodotus made his work known through lectures, solitary reading and private study were (and are) expensive pastimes where both books and lighting are costly. Very likely in composing his work Herodotus envisaged that it would be read aloud to a group, and thus saw no need to change many features that might appear better suited to listeners than to solitary readers. See further Johnson 1994; 2000. The contemporary popularity of audio-books shows how a skilful reader can lend appeal to literature far more demanding that many of the listeners would think of tackling on their own.

[7] Reminding us of Anacreon's Smerdies (347), the pretty Thracian boy whose hair was clipped as a punishment; but that association seems to lead nowhere.

when Cambyses set out, to keep an eye on affairs at the heart of the Empire; moreover, there was obviously some risk involved in campaigning, and a potential problem over the succession, since Cambyses had no son nor, apparently, other brothers. Cambyses took this dream as a warning of potential trouble (cf. 3.65.2), and dispatched to Susa Prexaspes, the most loyal to him (πιστότατος) of all the Persians,[8] to kill Smerdis. Herodotus allows some uncertainty about the method: some say, on a hunting trip, others by drowning him; this admission of doubt on a relatively minor point increases our confidence in the startling implication that the assassination of the heir to the throne had failed to attract notice.[9] It might have been easier to arrange a fatal accident while hunting, a favourite pastime of the Persian nobility.[10] But Herodotus has not appreciated that Prince Smerdis would go nowhere without a retinue; the heir to the throne could not simply disappear. However, we shortly find (3.32) that Cambyses' sister-wife is aware of Smerdis' death and of Cambyses' responsibility for it. Uncertainty as to who knows the truth or has good grounds for suspecting it is an important theme in the following narrative.

We are not dealing with a story constructed from snippets of gossip and guesswork. That Cambyses secretly disposed of his brother, his only rival, is the tale told by Darius'great inscription, (*DB* 1§10), carved in the rock face of Mt Bisitun overlooking the road from Babylon to Ecbatana and offering in three languages (Elamite, Babylonian, and Old Persian) a narrative of the events by which Darius gained the throne, in fulfilment of a divine plan. The inscription cannot be read from ground-level; this text was meant for the gods and for eternity. But Darius says that he had copies made and sent 'in all directions among the lands'; a text in Aramaic from Elephantine and one in Babylonian cuneiform from Babylon have been found.[11]

Darius puts Bardiya's death before Cambyses' departure for Egypt, though he tells us that 'it did not become known to the people'. Though there has been a twentieth-century fashion for doubting Darius' veracity as to Cambyses' fratricide,[12] *if* we accept that Bardiya died before Cambyses left for Egypt, when

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[8] 'A proposito di Pressaspe Erodoto tratteggia una figura di ministro nobile e tragica, fedele sino all' estremo' (Asheri). The English translation introduces a further nuance: 'With Prexaspes, Herodotus delineates a figure of a noble and tragic *friend*' (my italics). On the implications of *pistos* and its relationship to OP *bandaka* see Missiou 1993: 377–391; Briant 2002: 324–326.

[9] Cf. 1.1.3; 2.103.2; in both instances the historical context is a fiction.

[10] The royal hunt did not simply have a social function but was a symbol of the power of the Persian king against his adversaries: Briant 2002: 297–299; Brosius 2006: 27, 44–45.

[11] For an English translation see Brosius in Asheri, Lloyd, Corcella 2007: 529–537. The importance of this site and its association with royalty were long recognized even though its significance seems to have been rapidly forgotten. Ctesias (*FGrHist* 688F1 = Diod.Sic. 2.13) totally misunderstood the relief and associates it with Semiramis; see further Hekster 2005: 134–141.

[12] This theory was first advanced by Beloch, in a footnote (Beloch 1914: 4 n. 1), and found an enthusiastic adherent in Olmstead, whose *History of the Persian Empire* (1948) was long the

a public announcement of his death would have been likely to mean postponement of this important campaign, it would have been feasible for the king to make arrangements to conceal his brother's death if he was close at hand, but it was hardly a task to be delegated from a distance, however trustworthy the agent selected. Improbable as this may sound to us, there are well attested examples of the suppression of news of a ruler's death, sometimes for years, until it became convenient to reveal the truth.[13] The layers of ceremonial surrounding access to the ruler (in which Herodotus saw an innovation introduced by the Mede Deioces (1.99)),[14] allowed an understudy to function convincingly. Cambyses did not expect that he would fail to return from his campaign to extend the Persian Empire to Egypt. But in such circumstances rumour and suspicion were bound to multiply.

The loyal and competent Prexaspes re-appears in an episode memorably illustrating the tensions between the ruler and his counsellors, when Cambyses, who is already showing signs of mental disturbance, perhaps to be connected with his treatment of the Apis bull (3. 33–35), wants to hear something about popular opinion of his rule, some feedback, we might say. Here Herodotus provides a summary description of Prexaspes' status (34.1): τὸν ἐτίμα τε μάλιστα καί οἱ τὰς ἀγγελίας ἐφόρεε οὗτος. We might say he was Cambyses'private secretary. The importance of the post is indicated by the inclusion of such an official among the ministers appointed by the ten-year-old Cyrus (1.114.2; cf. 120.2). Prexaspes' son had already started on a career that might lead to high office; he had the honour of serving the king's wine.[15] Both positions of course imply close proximity to the king. We may infer that before reaching his position of pre-eminence Prexaspes had served under Cyrus, and had thus formed his conceptin of how a monarch should conduct himself.

'What do people say about me?' Cambyses asks Prexaspes.[16] Prexaspes does his best to warn the king (3.34.2). 'Master, you are highly praised on all points

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standard handbook; nowadays the burden of proof appears to lie with those who regard the story of the bogus Bardiya as essentially true. Darius' reiterated insistence that he is telling the truth has created a prejudice against him, but allowance must be made for the conventions of such inscriptions: see further Westenholz 2000; West 2007.

[13] Thus the death of Suleyman while on campaign in Hungary (7 Sept. 1566) was successfully concealed from the army by his Grand Vizier until the campaign was effectively concluded. The death of the Fifth Dalai Lama in 1680 was kept secret by the Regent of Tibet for at least 9 years. Kurosawa's film, *Kagemusha* (*The Substitute*) shows that the most serious problems arise in dealing with favourite dogs, horses, and concubines.

[14] In fact, like much else in the administration of the Persian Empire, a debt to Assyria: see further Dalley 1998b. On Deioces see further Meier *et al.* 2004.

[15] Like Nehemiah (*Neh.* 1.11–2.8); cf. Xen.*Cyr.*1.3.8–10.

[16] The ruler's desire to learn popular opinion of his rule becomes a popular motif, though to make a good story the hero must be prepared to go to more trouble than Cambyses is prepared to take here; the outstanding example is the Caliph Haroun al' Rashid (786–809 AD). See further Hekster 2005: 157.

but one; they say you are too fond of wine'. The vocative, δέσποτα, Master, is appropriate in addressing an absolute ruler, emphasising the insignificance of the speaker and expressing a much greater degree of deference than βασιλεῦ.[17] Prexaspes has weighed his words well. He makes his own view more palatable by presenting it as popular opinion; it is clear from the preceding narrative that Cambyses' behaviour gave cause for serious concern. Cambyses is furious (3.35); he will demonstrate that his subjects are wrong if they say he is too fond of wine. If he can shoot Prexaspes' son through the heart, they are talking nonsense; if not, they are right and he is mentally unsound. In a ghastly reversal of the motif familiar to us from the story of Wilhelm Tell[18] Cambyses shoots his cupbearer exactly through the heart. Herodotus brings out the horror of this atrocity in Cambyses' gloating comment: 'Did you ever see anyone shoot more accurately? 'he asks. Prexaspes' response displays an almost superhuman degree of self-control. 'Seeing a madman and fearing for himself he said "Master, I do not think even the god himself[19] would shoot so well"'. We may been reminded of Harpagus' reaction when Astyages tells him that the meat on which he has just feasted came from his own son (1.119).[20] It is instructive to compare this extraordinary self-control with Thyestes' reaction to Atreus' horrible feast, as described by Aeschylus (*Ag.*1583–1602). Harpagus and Prexaspes, along with Candaules' queen (1.19.2), are certainly exceptions to the stereotype of Oriental emotionalism contrasted with Greek self-restraint.[21] But Harpagus is very ready to change masters, and goes over to Cyrus, seeking vengeance (1.123.1). 'Under the mask of the devoted servant, he was henceforth the inexorable enemy of the king, unwilling to rest until Astyages had been overthrown' (Burkert). We might expect a similar reaction from Prexaspes, but he remains loyal. Should we discern the effect of a deliberate weakening of family ties complementing a strengthening of loyalty to the throne?

Prexaspes reappears (62) when the proclamation of a *coup d'état* by Smerdis comes to Cambyses in Syria on his way back to Susa. Herodotus' narrative is remarkably vivid. Cambyses at first supposes that Prexaspes has failed to carry out his fratricidal instructions. Herodotus highlights his reproachful questions with alliteration (not a common device in Greek) and word-play: Πρήξασπες, οὕτω μοι διέπρηξας τό τοι προσέθηκα πρῆγμα; Prexaspes replies with some solemnity: 'Master, this report is not true. Your brother Smerdis has not rebelled against you, and from him you will never have trouble, either great or small.

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[17] See further Dickey 1996: 46f.

[18] Well discussed by Aly 1921: 86–88.

[19] 'A nameless god, whom a Greek could call "Apollo the Archer" and a Persian "Mithras"' Asheri. Herodotus relishes the various names under which the same divinities may be worshipped by different peoples.

[20] Illuminatingly discussed by Burkert 1983: 108f.

[21] On this stereotype see Hall 1989: 80–84, 99–100.

I myself carried out your orders and buried him with my own hands. So if the dead are rising from their graves, expect Astyages the Mede[22] too to rise up against you. But if it is as before, most certainly nothing further can come from your brother.'

Prexaspes has a positive suggestion, which Cambyses approves: they should call back the messenger who has brought the news, and ask if he had actually seen Smerdis, and, if not, who gave him his order. The messenger reveals that his instructions came from the *magos* whom Cambyses had left as palace steward (τῶν οἰκίων μελεδωνός 3. 61.1; 63.4; cf. ἐπίτροπος τῶν οἰκίων 63.2; 65.5), Patizeithes. It was well suggested by Marquart (1905: 145) that Herodotus (or his source) took Patizeithes to be a personal name when it was really the title of an office, **pati-xsayah-niθa*, roughly equivalent to ἐπίτροπος τῶν οἰκίων.[23] The messenger explains that he was acting on Smerdis' orders, but that nobody had actually seen Smerdis since Cambyses left for Egypt. Cambyses acknowledges that Prexaspes is blameless, and asks who he thinks is responsible. Prexaspes has guessed the truth, that the steward, Patizeithes, is masterminding an impersonation by his brother, who strongly resembles the dead prince and is actually named Smerdis. Cambyses now realises that the dream which prompted his fratricide (3.30.2) has indeed been fulfilled.

What might the ἐπίτροπος/ μελεδωνός οἰκίων be expected to do? When Xerxes was about to set out from Abydos Herodotus tells us that he sent home to Susa his wise uncle Artabanus, giving him immense responsibility (7.52.2): σοὶ γὰρ ἐγὼ μούνωι σκῆπτρα τὰ ἐμὰ ἐπιτρέπω. Artabanus has already been shown deputizing for Xerxes as the recipient of dreams which forbade the king abandoning his planned campaign (7.15–18). He is clearly Xerxes'most trusted associate and a natural choice as viceroy or regent in the king's absence. It would have been sensible for Cambyses to make a similar appointment before invading Egypt; he had himself been appointed to this function when Cyrus set out against the Massagetae (1.208).

On the homeward journey Cambyses falls ill, and in his deathbed speech to the most important (τοὺς λογιμωτάτους) Persians reveals that on his orders Prexaspes killed the real Smerdis, and the usurper is an imposter. Viewing this *coup d'état* as a bid to recover Median supremacy he solemnly charges those present to depose the usurper. Cambyses' revelation exposes Prexaspes to appalling punishment, but fortunately his hearers simply do not believe the king's deathbed confession, supposing that Cambyses has maliciously concocted this story about his brother's death in order to cause trouble. Prexaspes, well

[22] This prepares us for the notion to which Cambyses attaches great importance in his deathbed speech (3.65.6–7) that the usurpers headed a rising of the Medes against the Persians. That seems to be simply an inference of Herodotus': see further Briant 2002: 895–896.

[23] See also Hegyi 1973.

aware of his precarious situation, vigorously denies killing Smerdis. It is an indication of the high regard in which he is widely held that he is believed when Cambyses is not.

Events do not stand still. We hear how Otanes came to suspect Smerdis (3.68–69)[24], and how the seven noble conspirators prepared for action. Prexaspes' position is now decidely insecure, and the bogus Smerdis and his brother make overtures to him (74.1). It made good sense for them to get Prexaspes on their side rather than leave him available to the leaders of an uprising. Having bound him to secrecy, they ask him to make a solemn declaration, from a tower in the palace to a gathering of the whole people, that their ruler is indeed the son of Cyrus. As often Herodotus expresses himself as if Persia and its far-flung population were no larger than a Greek city-state. Prexaspes agrees, but once in possession of his lofty platform delivers a speech quite contrary to the plans of Smerdis' supporters, by which we see that he is still guided by Cambyses' wishes. Having recounted Cyrus' descent from Achaemenes and recalled the benefits of his reign, he reveals the truth, that he himself, constrained by Cambyses, killed Smerdis the son of Cyrus, and that the power as now in the hands of the *magoi.* Ending rather in the manner of Cambyses' deathbed speech with a curse on the Persians should they fail to deal with the usurper, he threw himself down from the tower to confirm that now, at last, he was speaking the truth.[25] Πρηξάσπης μέν νυν ἐὼν τὸν πάντα χρόνον ἀνὴρ δόκιμος οὕτω ἐτελεύτησε: a fine, formal conclusion to this episode.

Darius, reviewing the reign of Cambyses in the Bisitun inscription, highlights the fratricide, and comments (*DB* 1§10) 'The Lie grew greatly in the land, in Persia, Media, and the other countries'. The antithesis of truth and falsehood forms a *leitmotif* in Herodotus' account of Cambyses' reign, and Prexaspes had fostered that falsehood. Herodotus builds up with some care this portrait of a courtier faithful to his country's interests who finally sacrifices his life to end the deception in which he himself had played a leading role, resisting the temptation to ingratiate himself with those currently in power and save himself. Cambyses treats him cruelly, not only wantonly killing his son but also betraying him in his deathbed speech. But Prexaspes serves the Achaemenid dynasty rather than an individual ruler; his story shows how the monarchy might remain stable despite the ruler's deficiencies. He has a sense of history, conjuring up Astyages to reinforce his insistence that Cambyses' brother is truly dead and rehearsing the dynasty's genealogy to underline his exhortation to depose the usurper. He takes a long-term view and represents an element of stability in

[24] Communication between Otanes and his daughter in the royal harem is surprisingly straightforward.

[25] For suicide confirming the speaker's good faith cf. Suet. *Otho* 10, Tac.*Hist.* 3.54 (*voluntaria morte dicta firmavit*), and, from a rather different milieu, the apocalyptic *Oracle of the Potter* (*P.Oxy.*2332 etc.), on which see further Koenen 2002.

the administration, which could withstand a monarch's erratic behaviour, though Prexaspes' career illustrates the high price that loyalty to such a regime might demand. The very public manner of his death, before a great crowd of witnesses, must be supposed to facilitate acceptance of the action taken by Darius and his comrades, exculpating them from the charge of regicide. Herodotus respected Prexaspes' loyalty, but his narrative conveys a sense that truth did not hold quite the high place in the Persian value system as we might have expected when we hear of its importance in the training of the young (1.136.2).

The relationship between king and trusted courtier was a fruitful theme in the literature of the ancient Levant. The story of Joseph in *Genesis* (37–50) is a happy example. But, as we have seen in considering episodes from Cambyses' time in Egypt, matters could go badly wrong for a trusted subordinate. Herodotus' tales of the Persian court reflect the outsider's view, whether his own or those of his informants, and we might suspect some distortion. For an insider's perspective it is rewarding to consider the *Story of Ahiqar*, a tale of Assyrian court life set in the reigns of Sennacherib and Esarhaddon.[26] Our earliest, incomplete, copy is in Aramaic, from the latter part of the fifth century, written on the verso of accounts for customs payments for 475; such thrift rather suggests a private copy. The general run of the narrative can be reconstructed from the later, fuller, recensions in many other languages (Syriac, Arabic, Ethiopian, Armenian, Turkish, Roumanian, and various Slavonic languages); it has also contributed substantially (and rather surprisingly) to the Greek *Life of Aesop* (*Vita G*, *W* 101–123), and Ahiqar is even drawn into a Jewish milieu in *Tobit* (1.21–22).Its impact may also be seen in Croesus' final appearance in Herodotus (3.36) (on which see further below). It is generally classified as Wisdom literature, Ahiqar's story serving as a proem for advice supposedly addressed to his nephew; his apophthegms (in no apparent order) aim to inculcate in scions of the upper classes the qualities needed for success, emphasising diligence, reliability, honesty, and discretion. Such a text could prove very useful in the training of scribes.

A summary may be helpful. Ahiqar, Sennacherib's chief minister, was childless, and adopted his sister's son, Nadin. Having trained the boy appropriately he persuaded the new king, Esarhaddon, to accept Nadin as his successor in royal service. But after Ahiqar's retirement Nadin contrived his condemnation for treason, and Esarhaddon ordered Ahiqar's former colleague, Nabusumiskun, much against the latter's will, to carry out the execution. However, Ahiqar reminded Nabusumiskun that he owed him a favour: in the time of Sennacherib

[26] For an up-to-date English translation of the Aramaic fragments see Lindenberger 1985; for a German translation Kottsieper 1991; both have very helpful introductions; see also Greenfield 1995; Dalley 2001. For a synoptic presentation of translations of the Syriac, Armenian, and Arabic texts see R.H. Charles 1913. For fragments of a Demotic version dated on palaeographical grounds to the first century AD see Zauzich 1976. On Slavonic versions see Jagić 1892 ('eine Lieblingslecture AltRusslands'). See also Degen 1977; Wilsdorf 1991; Luzzato 2003.

he had saved Nabusumiskun from a similar sentence by hiding him in his own house until the king's wrath passed, when Sennacherib was delighted to learn that Nabusumiskun was still alive. Nabusumiskun accordingly took into his confidence the two men with him and persuaded them to kill instead a eunuch slave whose corpse could be produced as evidence that Ahiqar had indeed been put to death.[27] A substantial reward might be expected in due course when the king came to feel the need of Ahiqar's counsel. So Nabusumiskun sheltered Ahiqar. Specific detail – the dimensions of the hiding place in which he is confined, his unkempt condition when he is at last released – engages our interst and sympathy. The rest of the narrative is lost in the Aramaic text, and we depend on later versions. News of Ahiqar's death emboldened Assyria's enemies, and the king bitterly regretted the loss of his wise counsellor. Nabusumiskun cautiously seized his opportunity, and revealed to the king that Ahiqar was still alive. Rehabilitated, Ahiqar saves his country; his ungrateful nephew is handed over to him for punishment.

Ahiqar's unjust condemnation is treated almost as a regular hazard of state service at a high level. Long ago he had risked rescuing a colleague in a similar predicament and could now call for a return of the favour. His loyalty and competence are unimpaired by his undeserved suffering. The cautious manner in which Nabusumiskun introduces his report of Ahiqar's survival shows that the dangers of disobedience to the king's commands, however ill-advised, were real enough.The topic is prominent in the instruction which Ahiqar offers his nephew. 'A king's word is gentle, but keener and more cutting than a double-edged dagger. Here is a difficult thing before you. Do not stand opposed to the king. His anger is swifter than lightning: look out for yourself. Let him not kindle it against your words, lest you depart before your time. When a royal command is given you, it is a burning fire. Execute it at once, lest it flare up against you and singe your hands. But rather let the king's command (be your) heart's delight … The king's tongue is gentle, but it breaks a dragon's ribs. It is like death, which is invisible … A king is as splendid to see as Shamash; and his majesty is glorious to them that tread the earth in peace' (Lindenberger's translation). We are familiar with such instruction from the *Old Testament*: compare, for instance, *Proverbs* 16.14f.: 'A king's anger is a messenger of death, and a wise man will appease it. In the light of the king's countenance is life, his favour is like a rain-cloud in the spring'; 19.12: 'A king's rage is like a lion's roar, his favour like dew on the grass'. Ahiqar's story may be

[27] Implying that Ahiqar himself is a eunuch; the availability of a suitable substitute might be thought providential. 'O, 'tis an accident that heaven provides' Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure* iv 3, 84 (on a somewhat similar turn of events). Similarly a stillborn baby is conveniently available to provide evidence that the infant Cyrus has not survived, unnecessarily, we might think, since the herdsman who had to arrange the child's exposure was told to leave it ἔνθα θηριωδέστατον εἴη τῶν ὀρέων, were hungry animals could be expected to dispose of the evidence.

understood to imply that for the loyal minister, despite temporary setbacks, all comes right in the end; his worth is appropriately acknowledged: 'eine Loblied auf assyrische Vasallentreue'.[28]

Ahiqar's story is echoed in Herodotus' account of Croesus' last appearance (3.36).[29] Herodotus had already (3.14.11) briefly alluded to Croesus' presence at Cambyses' court in Egypt (some 20 years after his kingdom was absorbed into the Persian Empire). 'Die seltsame und nicht immer glückliche Art, in der in späteren Kapiteln der überlebende Kroisos eingeführt ist, erklärt sich am ehesten, wenn Herodot nicht ganz assimilierte Berichte wiedergibt'.[30] Having enjoyed exposure to Solon's wisdom Croesus represents a semi-hellenic viewpoint, and is moved to protest, when Cambyses has twelve of the noblest Persians buried alive head downwards on a minor charge.[31] He urges prudence and self-restraint, recalling Cyrus' instruction that he should not hesitate to advise Cambyses. Cambyses is justifiably indignant that Croesus sees himself as qualified to give advice, sound as we may judge the advice to be in this case, and takes up his bow; since Croesus is able to scurry off outside, Cambyses delegates his execution to servants. They calculate that Cambyses may regret this decision and decide to conceal Croesus for a time in the hope of a reward if the king changes his mind. Cambyses does indeed regret the death sentence and rejoices in Croesus' survival, but sentences to execution for their disobedience the servants who saved him. This is the last we hear of Croesus.

This is rather a jejune narrative, a pale shadow of Ahiqar's story. There is no suggestion that the servants who arrange to conceal Croesus are motivated by friendship or anything but the chance of gain, no indication of how his concealment was arranged, or how Cambyses came to miss him. Croesus himself is a rather passive figure; he was not suited to the role of a wise counsellor. Ahiqar's apophthegms illustrating the hazards of royal service show the risks inherent in the ruler's omnipotence; Cambyses' insanity introduces an unpredictable element that obviously heightens the risks.

The theme of a vassal's extraordinary loyalty to his lord is developed in a military context in Herodotus' account (3.150–160) of the self-sacrificial devotion of Zopyrus in recapturing the rebellious city of Babylon. This narrative will not stand up to consideration as serious history; it has very little connection with what Darius says about the two revolts of Babylon in the Bisitun inscription where not Zopyrus but Intaphernes (Vindafarna) plays the leading role (*DB* iii § 50). What Herodotus offers appears to be the transposition to a Persian

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[28] Hausrath 1918: 46.

[29] I do not mean to imply direct influence.

[30] Burkert 1985: 14 (2007: 126); see also Friedrich 1998; West 2003.

[31] Cf. 7. 114. Asheri suggests a religious significance, 'a form of propitiatory ritual sacrifice to chthonic divinities'.

context of a motif to which his audience must have known a parallel from the Trojan Cycle.

Zopyrus[32] is introduced as the son of Megabyxus, one of Darius' six comrades in removing Pseudo-Smerdis. When Darius' forces have for nearly twenty months besieged the city unsuccessfully Zopyrus learns that one of the baggage mules in his force has produced a foal, and recalling a Babylonian's earlier taunt that the Persians would take the city when mules foal,[33] he decides on drastic action. In order to pose as a defector with a grievance against the king he carries out a fearful act of self-mutilation, and presents himself to the appalled Darius having cut off his nose and ears, clumsily chopped off his hair, and flogged himself. He plans to win the confidence of the Babylonians and persuade them to appoint him to a position of command. Autocracy has certainly not stifled his courage and initiative; contrast Hippocrates' view of its psychological effects (*Aer.* 16). All goes according to plan, a plan so improbable that we can hardly fail to see in its success divinity at work, active on the Persian side, and in due course Zopyrus is able to open the gates of Babylon to the Persian army. His extraordinary achievement is duly recognized (160): in Darius' view his services to Persia were second only to those of Cyrus, and every year Darius presented him with the gifts most highly valued in Persia, among other things giving him Babylon to be his own demesne for as long as he lived.[34]

The motif of the maltreated deserter recalls the ruse by which Odysseus made his way into Troy on an intelligence-gathering mission briefly recalled in the *Odyssey* (4.244ff.) and related at greater length in the *Little Iliad.* It reappears later in the story of Sextus Tarquinius' role in the capture of Gabii as related by Livy (1.53f.) and Dionysius of Halicarnassus (4.53–8)[35] though the self-inflicted mutilation carried out by Zopyrus far exceeds what these partial parallels offer.[36] Moreover, amputation of ears or nose was familiar as a punishment, as in the case of pseudo-Smerdis (3.69.5); when the wounds had healed their effects would continue to raise the suspicion that the subject had committed serious crimes.[37]

Herodotus tells us that the grandson of this heroic Persian deserted to Athens, and we may find briefly appealing the idea of the asylum-seeker romancing

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[32] This is not a recognizable Persian name; most likely it represents an unknown Iranian name adapted via popular etymology. It was a popular Greek name later (see *LGPN*), but fifth-century examples are very rare.

[33] The expression retained its appeal for King Abdullah in the twentieth century: 'Asked when he would ever receive a diplomat he disliked, he answered."When my mule foals."' (Montefiore 2011: 478).

[34] Herodotus appears to have coined ἀγαθοεργίη for this episode (3.160.1, cf. 154.1).

[35] See further Köves-Zulauf 1987.

[36] Could this exaggeration of self-inflicted injury derive from deliberate damage to sculpture?

[37] Such mutilation could be regarded as indicating the authorities' proper concern for law and order: cf. Xen.*Ana.*1.9.13. It should be borne in mind that imprisonment was not used as a punishment.

about his grandfather's exploits (though Herodotus' silence as to the source of this story does not favour that hypothesis). So far as concerns the reduction of rebellious Babylon, this narrative is not to be trusted. But at the heart of this story lies a solidly historical kernel, the importance attached in the Persian empire to noting and lavishly rewarding good service.

In his presentation of Zopyrus Herodotus indicates the incentives to dedicated service, above all the desire to win the approval of a ruler who could express his appreciation with conspicuous generosity. "What should be done for the man whom the king wishes to honour?" asks King Ahasuerus of Haman, hitherto his right-hand man, in *Esther* (6.6), and Haman, thinking that he himself is about to benefit thus, replies (6.7–9). "For the man whom the king wishes to honour, let there be brought royal robes which the king himself wears, and a horse which the king rides, with a royal crown on its head. And let the robes and the horse be delivered to one of the king's most honourable officers, and let them attire the man whom the king wishes to honour and lead him mounted on the horse through the city square, calling out as he goes 'See what is done for the man whom the king wishes to honour'".[38] Haman's suggestions are rather naïve, and *Esther* is even less reliable than Herodotus as a guide to the customs and conventions of the Persian court. What is significant here is the emphasis on the king as the source of honour and on the association of such rewards with the king himself. Xenophon provides a commentary (*Cyr.* 8.2.7–8): πολὺ γὰρ διενεγκὼν ἀνθρώπων τῶι πλείστας προσόδους λαμβάνειν πολὺ ἔτι πλέον διήνεγκε τῶι πλεῖστα ἀνθρώπων δωρεῖσθαι. κατῆρξε μὲν οὖν τούτου Κῦρος, διαμένει δ' ἔτι καὶ νῦν τοῖς βασιλεῦσιν ἡ πολυδωρία. τίνι μὲν γὰρ φίλοι πλουσιώτεροι ὄντες φανεροὶ ἢ Περσῶν βασιλεῖ; τίς δὲ κοσμῶν κάλλιον φαίνεται στολαῖς τοὺς περὶ αὐτὸν ἢ βασιλεύς; τίνος δὲ δῶρα γιγνώσκεται ὥσπερ ἔνια τῶν βασιλέως, ψέλια καὶ στρεπτοὶ καὶ ἵπποι χρυσοχάλινοι; οὐ γὰρ δὴ ἔξεστιν ἐκεῖ ταῦτα ἔχειν ὧι ἂν μὴ βασιλεύς δῶι. The commercial value of the royal gifts is not what gives them importance; it is their association with the king personally.[39]

The Greeks were clearly impressed by what they saw as a system for registering distinguished service; official recognition did not depend on the vagaries of memory and haphazard observation. Herodotus reports (8.90.4) the presence of scribes at Xerxes' side as he watched the battle of Salamis; it was their task to record the details of captains who did particularly well.

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[38] *The New English Bible* (1970). On the *persona* apparently adopted by the author of *Esther* Gordis 1981 is helpful.

[39] The importance attached to robes is striking. Concern for ceremony, and particularly for appropriate dress, was uncongenial to Greeks and easily misrepresented as symptomatic of an undue regard for appearances (as exemplified in the anxiety about Xerxes' clothing (κόσμον ὅστις εὐπρεπής) in Aeschylus' *Persae* (832–836, 845–851). Against this background *Genesis'* story of the elaborate garment ('a coat of many colours' *AV*, 'a long, sleeved robe' *New English Bible*) with which Joseph was presented by his father (*Gen.*37.3–4, 23,32) takes on a further significance.

He mentions (8.85.3) two Samians who distinguished themselves, Theomestor, who was appointed as tyrant of Samos, and Phylakos, who was rewarded with a large estate and whose name was entered on the list of the king's benefactors (εὐεργέται), *orosangai* being the Persian term thus translated.[40] 'The man who supported my (royal) house, him I treated well' claims Darius (*DB* iv §63). Herodotus records how his generosity to Mandrocles, the designer of the bridge over the Bosporus, bore fruit in what must have been a remarkable painting (4.88) and may well have served as a source for Herodotus' description of Xerxes' forces (7.61–90).[41]

We hear nothing of any reward for Prexaspes, committed to the service of an unbalanced autocrat. It is highly significant that Herodotus has him in his last speech refer to Cyrus as the model of a good king who inspired willing obedience in his subjects (3.75.1). By that speech, its sincerity confirmed by his suicide, Prexaspes restored his own honour, insured the fulfilment of the purpose at which Cambyses aimed in his deathbed confession, and legitimised the deed of Darius and his accomplices.

Prexaspes and Zopyrus have not been turned into sycophants or softened by life in a despot's entourage. They are clever, steadfast, and self-controlled. They also have a sense of honour. Ahiqar, though supposedly too old for regular employment, is resilient. Restored to court he does not hold a grudge against the king who failed to take into account his previous unblemished character, and fulfils the expectation that he will be able to think of some expedient when everyone else is baffled. In their dedication to the preservation of the Empire, whether Assyrian or Persian, these men have no counterparts among the major Greek figures of Herodotus' work.

To Greeks dedication to the imperial ideal as represented by the Persian empire seemed to entail a distortion of normal values. Concern for ceremony, and particularly for appropriate dress, part of the mechanism for enhancing the power of the state by fostering the charisma of kingship, was uncongenial to Greeks, and easily misrepresented as indicating an undue regard for appearances. It is understandable if the rewards and satisfactions of state service looked rather questionable when viewed by those who did not find self-evident the advantages of the strong, centralized rule without which the empire, and indeed Persia itself, would have rapidly disintegrated into lawless tribalism.

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[40] See further Schmitt 1967: 74.

[41] So Stein 1893 on 4.88; Munro 1902: 295. We must admire the skill whereby Mandrocles turns a tribute to Darius into publicity for his own achievement.

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