



MYTHOPOUCH

RETELLING

HERODOTUS: THE HISTORIES

VOL. 4 CAMBYSES, THE MAGI, AND DARIUS

Chapters 13-16

A modern educational version for readers aged 15 and up

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CHAPTER 13: CAMBYSES IN EGYPT

Cambyses (*kam-BY-seez*), son of Cyrus, marched on Egypt. Amasis was dead. His son **Psammenitus** held the throne. There is a story that Cambyses had asked for Amasis's daughter and been sent another girl instead, Nitetis, daughter of the king Amasis had overthrown, and that the insult was the cause of the war. There is another, Egyptian, story that makes Cambyses half Egyptian himself. Herodotus prefers the first, and notes that Persia does not need a personal slight to want a rich neighbour.

A Greek of Halicarnassus, Phanes, who had served Amasis and then quarrelled with him, deserted to the Persians and told Cambyses how to cross the desert: bargain with the king of the Arabs for water, skins filled and loaded on camels, staged along the road. The Arabs kept the bargain. At Pelusium the armies met. Herodotus says the bones were still there in his day, sorted into two piles, Persian and Egyptian, and that the Egyptian skulls were thicker, a claim he offers as fact and that you should file under zeal. The Egyptians broke, and fled to Memphis.

THE KING'S DAUGHTER WITH A JAR

Cambyses sent a ship up the river with a herald. The Memphians destroyed the ship and tore the crew to pieces. He took the city. He set Psammenitus on the road outside, with other Egyptians, to be tested. First the king's daughter came past in a slave's dress, with a jar for water, and the daughters of the leading men with her, crying. The fathers cried out. Psammenitus looked at the ground. Then his son came past with two thousand others, ropes at their necks, going to be executed for the ship. He looked at the ground. Then an old companion went by, a man who had sat at his table, now begging. Psammenitus wept and called his name.

Cambyses asked why he had not wept for his children and wept for a beggar. Psammenitus said: my own grief was too great for tears. The sorrow of a friend, fallen from such a height to such a depth, could be wept for. Croesus, who was there, wept. Cambyses was moved, and ordered the son saved. The order came late. The young man had been the first cut down.

From there the account darkens, and Herodotus marks some of it as what the Egyptians say. Cambyses had Amasis's body dragged out, whipped, and pricked, and when it would not come apart (the embalming held) burned it, a thing both Persian and Egyptian religion forbade. He sent an army to the Ammonians that vanished into the sand, and an army towards Ethiopia that ate its baggage animals and then, he reports, turned on itself before he called it back. He mocked the image in the temple of Hephaestus. He stabbed the calf the Egyptians called Apis, the god made visible, in the thigh, and the calf died, and he mocked the priests. He married his sister, two of them in the Greek account, because a Persian judge, asked if there was a law allowing it, said he knew of no such law and of another law that the king of Persia might do what he wished. He kicked one sister to death when she mourned their brother. He shot a son of Prexaspes through the heart to prove his hand was steady, and told the father the shot showed he was not mad.

Historian's Note: The mad king

Cambyses did conquer Egypt, in 525 BCE. The rest (Apis, the sister, the arrow) comes largely through Egyptian and Greek hostility, and Herodotus himself sometimes says 'the Egyptians say.' A king who stabs a god, in a priest's telling, is already condemned. Keep the conquest. Hold the portrait of total madness a little away from your body. The Histories uses it for a purpose: absolute power, unchecked by a second voice, eats the family first.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Psammenitus weeps for a friend and not for his children. Do you accept his explanation, or does the scene ask you to judge him?
2. Herodotus says the Egyptian skulls were thicker, and that he saw the bones. What is the danger of a detail that sounds like evidence?
3. The royal judges tell Cambyses there is a law that the king may do as he wishes. How is that different from saying there is no law?

CHAPTER 14: THE MAN WITH NO EARS

Cambyses had left a brother in Persia, **Smerdis**, the same name as his maternal uncle's son. A dream troubled him, that a messenger came from Persia to say Smerdis sat on the throne and touched the sky with his head. He sent Prexaspes home to kill the brother. Then, in Syria, a herald arrived with the news the dream had staged: Smerdis, son of Cyrus, had declared himself, and the army was to obey him and not Cambyses.

Cambyses understood, too late, that the Magus he had left as steward (a man also called Smerdis, whose ears Cyrus had cut off for a grave offence) had taken the name and the vacant place. He leapt on his horse to ride for Persia. The cap of his scabbard fell off, and the naked sword struck his thigh, in the same place where he had struck the god Apis. The wound rotted. Before he died he called the leading Persians and told them the truth. His brother was dead. The king in Persia was a Median Magus. He begged them not to let the throne pass back to the Medes. Most of them did not believe him. They thought he had invented the murder to set them against his brother.

OTANES' DAUGHTER

The false Smerdis ruled, and ruled mildly, remitting tribute and military service for three years, so that no one outside a small circle was eager to unmask him. **Otanes**, a Persian of the first rank, suspected. His daughter **Phaedymia** had been one of Cambyses' wives and had passed, with the household, to the new king. He asked her who she slept beside. She did not know. The wives were kept apart. He asked her to find out whether the man had ears. She said it was dangerous, and then, if he insisted, she would try. The Magi slept by turns with the women. When her turn came and the man slept, she felt for the ears. There were none. At daybreak she sent word to her father.

Otanes took six men into the secret: Aspathines, Gobryas, Intaphrenes, Megabyzus, Hydarnes, and **Darius** (*duh-RY-us*), son of Hystaspes, who arrived in Susa while the plan was forming and joined it. They were seven. Darius wanted to go in at once. Otanes wanted to gather more support. Darius said that if they delayed, he himself would denounce them, because he would not let a Median sit on the throne while Persians knew. They agreed to strike immediately.

Historian's Note: Behistun

A cliff at Behistun, carved in Darius's own reign, tells this story in Persian, Elamite, and Babylonian. The false king is there called Gaumata, a Magus who pretended to be Bardiya, Cyrus's son. The carving is a victor's account, and so is Herodotus. They agree on the outline: a usurper, a small band, Darius taking the throne. They do not agree on every name. Phaedymia's hand in the dark is Herodotus's, and it is the sort of scene he will not give up.

On the road they met the omens they needed. A messenger from Prexaspes, whom the Magi had leaned on, told them the steward had told the truth in public and then thrown himself from the tower. They took it as a sign. At the palace gate the guards were ready to stop a group of men with no announcement. The seven behaved like men who had a right to enter, and the guards let them through. Inside, the two Magi were discussing the messenger's news. They fought. Darius and Gobryas were on one of them in a dark room. Gobryas had him down and told Darius to strike.

Darius was afraid of hitting the wrong body. Gobryas said, push the sword through both of us. Darius pushed, and hit the Magus.

They cut off the heads, ran out, shouted what they had done, and killed every Magus they could find. The day became a festival, the Magophonia, on which no Magus was supposed to be seen in the streets.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Phaedyia is asked to risk her life to settle a political fact with her hands. How much of this history depends on people who are not the ones who later take the credit?
2. The false king remits taxes and is therefore popular. Why is a mild usurper harder to remove than a cruel one?
3. Darius threatens to denounce his own allies if they delay. Is that commitment, or the first sign of how he intends to rule?

CHAPTER 15: SEVEN MEN AND A HORSE

Five days later, when the killings had settled, the seven met to decide the shape of Persia. Otanes spoke for putting power in the hands of the many. A monarch can do what he likes without a reckoning. Give a man that, and he leaves the ordinary thoughts of men. He envies the best of the citizens, and takes pleasure in the worst. He is inconsistent, and you cannot contend with him. Rule by the many has the fairest of names, equality before the law, and it does none of the things a monarch does.

Megabyzus spoke for an oligarchy. Nothing is more foolish and violent than a useless crowd. A tyrant at least knows what he is doing. The people do not. Let them be governed, and let the government be a company of the best men, among whom he would expect to be.

Darius spoke for monarchy. Nothing is better than one best man. Oligarchy breeds private feuds and those feuds breed a monarch. Democracy breeds corruption and a champion of the people, and the champion becomes a monarch. The Persians were freed by one man, Cyrus, not by a crowd. Leave the inheritance as it is.

Four of the seven preferred his speech. Otanes, losing, asked to be outside the competition, for himself and his descendants, and they agreed. His house remains the only free house in Persia, Herodotus says, obeying only so far as it wishes, so long as it does not transgress the laws.

THE NEIGH

They agreed that the king should be whichever of them, riding out at sunrise beyond the city, had his horse neigh first. Darius's groom, Oebares, wanted his master to win. There are two versions of the trick. In one, he rubbed his hand on a mare Darius's horse favoured, and kept the hand in his trousers until morning, and let the stallion smell it at the place. In the other, more openly sexual in the telling Herodotus declines to stress, he used the mare herself at the spot the night before. At sunrise Darius's horse neighed, and lightning flashed, as if to second it. The others dismounted and did obeisance. Otanes had already withdrawn.

Historian's Note: The debate

Persians of 522 BCE did not hold a seminar in Greek political theory. The three speeches (democracy, oligarchy, monarchy) are Herodotus thinking in Greek, through Persian mouths, about the question his own century was living: what sort of power can be endured. That does not make the scene worthless. It makes it a different kind of evidence. It tells you what a serious Greek thought the options were, a generation before Athens and Sparta turned the argument into a war.

Darius organised the empire into provinces and fixed the tribute, and Herodotus lists the satrapies and the amounts with the pleasure of a man who has got hold of a document. He notes who paid horses, who paid grain, who paid eunuchs, and that India paid the most gold. The Indians, he has heard, get their gold from ants, smaller than dogs and larger than foxes, who throw up gold-bearing sand as they dig, and must be raided at the hottest hour of the day, when the ants are underground, with camels set to run. He is reporting the edge of the tax list as wonder. The tax

list itself is the more important marvel: an empire that can count.

He also records a smaller, uglier story of the new reign. **Intaphrenes**, one of the seven, pushed past the king's doorkeepers and cut off their noses and ears when they would not admit him. Darius feared a plot. Intaphrenes and his house were condemned. His wife came to the palace and wept. Darius offered to save one of her kinsmen, whichever she chose. She chose her brother. He asked why not her husband or a son. She said she might have another husband and other sons. She could not have another brother, her parents being dead. Darius was pleased, and gave her the brother and the eldest son as well. The rest he killed. The sentence is famous. It is also a window into what the new equality of the seven was worth, a year later, at a door.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Otanes, Megabyzus, and Darius each describe the failure of the systems they reject. Which failure do you think Herodotus himself most feared?
2. The kingship is decided by a horse, and the horse is arranged. What does the story suggest about the difference between a sign and a plan?
3. Intaphrenes' wife chooses her brother. Is her reasoning cold, or is it the only reasoning left once a king has offered an impossible mercy?

CHAPTER 16: THE ENDS OF THE TRIBUTE LIST

Around the list of provinces Herodotus hangs the peoples he has heard of and not seen, because an empire's edge is where his curiosity gets loudest. Arabia, he says, is the farthest inhabited land to the south, and it is the only place that produces frankincense, myrrh, cassia, cinnamon, and ledanon. The frankincense trees are guarded by winged snakes, small and many-coloured. The collectors smoke them out with storax. Cassia grows in a shallow lake, defended by bat-like creatures that scream. Cinnamon they cannot even say where it grows. Birds bring the sticks to cliff-nests, and the collectors leave joints of meat below, which the birds carry up, too heavy for the nests, so that the nests fall and the sticks can be gathered. He reports this with a straight face and a phrase he uses often: I do not know, but they say.

To the east, India is the farthest land, and the Indians are many peoples, not one. Some eat raw flesh. Some eat nothing that has life. Some, at the edge, kill and eat their sick before the disease can waste them, and do not wait for a natural death, which they count a horror. He does not pretend to have sat at those tables. He is passing on what the Persian administrators, and travellers, told a Greek who asked.

West, towards the setting sun, he is more cautious. Europe he will not claim to know to its end. He laughs at men who draw maps of the world as a perfect circle, with Asia equal to Europe, and the Ocean running round it like a compass stroke. He has seen no evidence for the shape. The laugh is important. The same man who tells you about gold-digging ants will not let a tidy diagram pass as knowledge.

A CUSTOM, AND A REFUSAL

He adds a Persian practice that belongs with the tribute, because it is about what an empire does with bodies. When a Persian man dies, the body is not buried until a dog or a bird has torn it. The Magi do this openly. Other Persians cover the corpse in wax and then bury it. He is colliding, without quite knowing it, with a funeral religion that does not want the earth polluted by a corpse. He records the collision and moves on.

Darius, meanwhile, had a quieter kind of power to establish. He married every available royal woman, Cyrus's daughters and Cambyses' widow among them, so that the new house would sit on the old. He set up a statue of himself on horseback, with an inscription naming the groom. He did not, Herodotus notes, forget the men who had gone in with him. Their privileges lasted. So did his suspicion, as Intaphrenes had learned.

The book of Cambyses and Darius ends with the empire counted, the edges decorated with snakes and ants and a circle of map-makers being scolded, and a king who has argued in public for the rule of one best man and then become him. The next wars will not be about who sits in Susa. They will be about how far the counting can be pushed, into the grass of Scythia and the harbours of Greece.

WHAT HERODOTUS TRUSTS, AND WHAT HE ONLY REPEATS

Claim	How he holds it	A fair modern reading
Satrapies and tribute	Listed, with amounts	A real administrative system, numbers not to be pressed too hard
Gold-digging ants	Heard, not seen	A traveller's tale, perhaps a garbled animal and a real gold country
Winged snakes of Arabia	Heard, not seen	Story attached to a real trade in incense
Circular world-maps	Rejected	His best methodological moment in the book

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why does Herodotus mock round maps in the same pages where he reports cinnamon-birds? Is that a contradiction, or a rule you can state?
2. An empire that can list its provinces can also list its edges in wonders. What is the political use of a marvellous frontier?
3. Darius marries the women of the house he has replaced. What does a dynasty need that a coup does not supply?