



MYTHOPOUCH

RETELLING

HERODOTUS: THE HISTORIES

VOL. 2 CYRUS AND THE FALL OF KINGDOMS

Chapters 5-8

A modern educational version for readers aged 15 and up

This is original Mythopouch wording. It is not the ancient Greek text and not the Henry Cary translation (D. Appleton, 1904) used as the narrative source.

© 2026 Mythopouch. All rights reserved. Mythopouch™ is a trademark of Mythopouch.

CONTENTS

THIS VOLUME

- Chapter 5: The Oracle That Told the Truth by a Trap
- Chapter 6: The Boy the King Tried to Erase
- Chapter 7: Persia Rises, and the Sea Peoples Bend
- Chapter 8: Babylon, and the Queen Who Asked for Blood

ALL VOLUMES IN THIS RETELLING

- Vol. 1 The Inquiry Begins
- Vol. 2 Cyrus and the Fall of Kingdoms (this file)
- Vol. 3 Egypt, the Gift of the River
- Vol. 4 Cambyses, the Magi, and Darius
- Vol. 5 Scythia, Libya, and the Edge of the Map
- Vol. 6 The Ionian Revolt
- Vol. 7 Marathon to Thermopylae
- Vol. 8 Salamis, Plataea, and Reference

CHAPTER 5: THE ORACLE THAT TOLD THE TRUTH BY A TRAP

Croesus decided to test the oracles before he trusted one with a war. He sent messengers to Delphi, to Abae in Phocis, to Dodona, to the oracles of Amphiaraus and of Trophonius, and to Branchidae in Milesian territory. On the hundredth day from leaving Sardis, each party was to ask what Croesus, son of Alyattes, king of Lydia, was doing at that hour. He had chosen a thing no one could guess. He cut up a tortoise and a lamb and boiled them together in a bronze cauldron with a bronze lid.

The other answers are not preserved. Delphi's is. The priestess answered, in verse, that she knew the number of the sand and the measure of the sea, that she understood the dumb and heard the voiceless, and that a smell had come to her of a hard-shelled tortoise boiling in bronze with the flesh of a lamb, bronze beneath and bronze above. Croesus was conquered by that. He decided Delphi knew what was.

He sent again, with gifts so heavy they became a proverb: a hundred and seventeen ingots of gold, a lion of gold weighing ten talents, bowls, a figure of a woman he said was his baker, and his own wife's necklaces and girdles. He asked whether he should march against the Persians, and whether he should take an ally. The answers came back famous. If he marched against the Persians he would destroy a great empire. He should find the most powerful of the Greeks and make them his friends.

THE WARNING HE LIKED LESS

He was pleased, and quite sure the empire to be destroyed was Cyrus's. A wise Lydian, **Sandanis**, told him the campaign was a bad bargain even if he won. The Persians wore leather, their land was rough, they drank water. If Croesus conquered them he would take nothing worth having. If they conquered him they would take Lydia, and they would not let it go. What have they got, he asked, that you can want, who have everything? Croesus did not listen. The Persians, before they conquered Lydia, had no luxury and nothing delicate.

He inquired which Greek state was strongest, and learned it was Sparta, lately risen over Tegea after a long failure, and Athens, then under Peisistratus. He made his alliance with Sparta. The Spartans accepted, because he had once sent them gold for a statue of Apollo when they could not find enough in Greece. He also misunderstood a second oracle, which said a mule would rule the Medes when his kingship fell. He decided a mule would never be king of the Medes. He forgot that a mule is the child of two kinds, and that Cyrus was Persian on his father's side and Median on his mother's.

PTERIA, AND THE WINTER THAT DID NOT SAVE HIM

He marched across the Halys (there is a story that Thales of Miletus split the river for him, and another that he used the existing bridges) into Cappadocia, took Pteria, and enslaved the people. Cyrus came to meet him. The battle was fierce and indecisive. Croesus, outnumbered, withdrew to Sardis and sent for his allies to come in five months. He did not expect Cyrus to move before spring. Cyrus did. He marched on Sardis at once, and arrived while Croesus was still dismissing

the mercenaries who had fought at Pteria.

The Lydians fought on the plain before the city, and fought well, until Cyrus, on the advice of Harpagus, put the baggage camels out in front. Horses hate the sight and smell of camels. The Lydian cavalry, the best arm Croesus had, broke. The riders dismounted and fought on foot. They were driven into the city. Sardis was besieged.

On the fourteenth day Cyrus offered a reward to the first man over the wall. A Mardian named Hyroeades watched a Lydian climb down after a helmet that had rolled from the citadel, and climb back up the same unguarded place, where the rock was supposed to be too steep for an assault. He led a party up that path. Sardis fell. The fifth generation had arrived.

Historian's Note: A great empire

The Delphic answer is the model of an oracle that is true and useless. Croesus would destroy a great empire. He did. It was his own. Herodotus does not treat this as a cheap trick only. When Croesus later complains, the priestess answers that he should have asked which empire, and that Apollo had delayed the fall of Sardis by three years and saved Croesus from the fire. The god, in this telling, keeps the letter and still claims to have been kind.

THE PYRE, AND THE NAME HE HAD FORGOTTEN

Cyrus put Croesus on a great pyre, with fourteen Lydian boys, either as a first-fruits to some god, or to see if a god would save a man who had thought himself happy, or because he had heard Croesus was pious and wanted to know. Croesus, standing on the pyre, remembered Solon, and said the name, groaning. Cyrus sent interpreters to ask whom he called. Croesus would not say, until they pressed him. Then he told the story of the Athenian who had counted no living man happy, and who had spoken not of Croesus only but of every human fortune. Cyrus, hearing it, changed his mind. He reflected that he was a man burning another man, and that nothing human is secure. He ordered the fire put out.

The flames were already past the edge of control. Croesus called on Apollo. The sky, which had been clear, filled with cloud, and a violent rain broke and put the fire out. Cyrus saw that Croesus was a good man and dear to the gods. He brought him down and asked what had possessed him to march. Croesus blamed the god of the Greeks, and then, because Cyrus let him send his chains to Delphi, he learned the priestess's answer and admitted the fault was his own. He became Cyrus's adviser. His mute son, who had never spoken, cried out when a Persian was about to kill his father in the taking of the city: Man, do not kill Croesus. It was the first thing he said, and afterward he could speak for the rest of his life.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Croesus tests the oracle with the tortoise and the lamb, then trusts it with a war. Does a successful test of knowledge prove a source will give you good advice?

2. Sandanis argues that conquering the poor is not worth the risk, because they have nothing you want and everything to gain from you. Where else does that argument appear in history?
3. Cyrus stops the burning because he recognises himself in Croesus. Is that mercy, or self-interest that happens to look like mercy?

CHAPTER 6: THE BOY THE KING TRIED TO ERASE

Herodotus now turns back, because a fallen king requires the man who felled him. The rule of the Medes had begun, in his account, with **Deioces**, who made himself indispensable as a judge, then refused to judge until he was made king, then built Ecbatana in seven circling walls, each of a different colour, and trained a people to the ceremony of not seeing their ruler. His son Phraortes conquered the Persians and died fighting the Assyrians. **Cyaxares** organised the army by kinds of troops, fought the Lydians to a standstill ended by an eclipse both sides took as a warning, and broke the power of Assyria, all but Babylon. His son was **Astyages** (*as-TY-uh-jeez*).

Astyages had a daughter, Mandane, and he dreamed she urinated so much that she flooded Asia. The dream-interpreters of the Magi told him it mattered. He married her not to a Mede of his own rank but to Cambyses, a Persian of a good house and a quiet temper, whom he counted below a Mede of the middle sort. Then he dreamed again, that a vine grew from Mandane and shaded all Asia. He sent for her, pregnant, and kept her under watch, meaning to destroy whatever was born.

HARPAGUS, THE HERDSMAN, AND THE DOG

When the child was born he called **Harpagus**, a kinsman and the most faithful of the Medes, and ordered him to take the boy home and kill him, and to bury him however he liked. Harpagus wept, and obeyed as far as the palace door. At home he told his wife. He would not do the killing himself. The child was royal, and Astyages was old, and if the daughter came to power the killer of her son would be in danger. He gave the baby to **Mitradates**, a herdsman of Astyages who pastured in the hills towards the north, a land full of wild animals, and ordered him to expose the child where the beasts would be quickest.

The herdsman's wife, whom he called Spako (the Median word for dog), had given birth that day to a stillborn child. She begged for the living boy. They exposed their own dead child in the royal clothes, in the hills, and kept the other. Harpagus sent the most trusted of his guards, saw the body, and was satisfied. The boy grew up under the name the herdsman's wife gave him. The story the Greeks liked said a bitch had suckled him. Herodotus prefers the human version, and notes that the name Spako made the wonder easy to grow.

At ten the boy was playing king with the village children, and he played it hard. A noble Mede's son refused his orders and was beaten. The father complained to Astyages. The king had the herdsman's boy brought in, and the boy answered like a prince: the children had made him king, and the other boy had disobeyed. Astyages recognised him. The face was his daughter's, and the answer was not a slave's.

Historian's Note: The exposed child

A king tries to kill the baby an omen has marked, the baby is saved by a humble household, and the truth comes out in a game. Greek audiences knew this shape from their own stories, Oedipus among them. Herodotus tells it as Median history. Modern readers treat the dreams, the dog, and the perfect recognition as legend gathered around a real rise: Cyrus of the Persian house of Achaemenes did overthrow Astyages, around 550 BCE. The path to that overthrow is where Herodotus is writing literature as much as archive.

THE FEAST THAT COULD NOT BE FORGIVEN

Astyages hid his rage from the boy and turned it on Harpagus. He asked what death had been used. Harpagus said he had not been able to do it himself, and had given the child to the herdsman. The herdsman, under threat, told the truth. Astyages smiled. He said the boy was alive, and that this was well, and that Harpagus should send his own son to meet the prince and come to dinner.

Harpagus sent his only son, glad to have come off so lightly. Astyages killed the boy, cut him up, roasted some and boiled some, and served him to his father, all but the head and the hands and the feet, which were kept in a basket. Harpagus ate. Then he was asked if he had enjoyed the meal. He said he had, very much. The cover was lifted. He saw his child's remains. He did not cry out. He gathered what he was given and went home, meaning, Herodotus says, to bury what he could. Asked afterward what it was like to eat his own son's flesh, he said that everything the king did was pleasing.

The Magi told Astyages the danger was past: the boy had already been king, in the village game, and the dream was spent. Send him to Persia, they said. Astyages did. Harpagus did not forget the basket.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Harpagus will not kill the baby with his own hands, and still hands him over to die. Does the distance make him less guilty, or only more able to live with it?
2. Astyages serves a father his own child and expects the meal to end the matter. Why is that a worse mistake than the exposure?
3. The Greeks told a story about a dog. Herodotus tells a story about a woman named Dog. What changes when the miracle becomes a person?

CHAPTER 7: PERSIA RISES, AND THE SEA PEOPLES BEND

Harpagus wanted revenge, and he could not take it alone. He sent a letter into Persia sewn inside a hare, because the roads were watched, and told Cyrus to raise the Persians. Cyrus did it by a trick of his own. He called the tribes, read them a letter he said came from Astyages naming him general, and then ordered them to clear a thorny tract of ground in a day. The next day he feasted them on his father's goats and wine, and asked which day they preferred. They said the second, by a long way. That, he said, was the difference between serving the Medes and being free. Follow me, and you will have this without being slaves. Refuse, and you will have yesterday's labour without number.

The Persians had long resented Median rule. They rose. Astyages armed the Medes and, blind enough to appoint the man he had wronged, made Harpagus general. Harpagus and part of the army went over. The rest fought, and lost. Astyages impaled the Magi who had told him to send the boy away, and was taken alive. Cyrus did him no further harm, and kept him until he died. So Persia inherited Media, and the empire changed its centre without quite changing its shape. Herodotus has Cyrus reign twenty-nine years.

WHAT HE SAYS THE PERSIANS ARE LIKE

Here Herodotus pauses, as he will pause again and again, to describe a people before he describes their next war. The Persians, he says, have no images, no temples, no altars. They sacrifice on the highest peaks to the circle of the sky, whom they call Zeus. They sacrifice also to sun, moon, earth, fire, water, and the winds. The sacrificer prays not for himself alone but for all Persians and for the king, for he counts himself among them.

A boy's education, from five to twenty, is riding, archery, and telling the truth. The thing they hold most shameful is to lie, and next to be in debt, because a debtor must lie. They respect neighbours in proportion to distance: themselves first, then those who live next to them, and so outward, so that they honour least the people farthest away. They adopt foreign customs easily, Median dress, Egyptian armour, Greek pleasures. Each man has several lawful wives and more concubines. A man is judged brave who has many sons. They decide the gravest matters drunk, and reconsider them sober, or the reverse. A river they will not urinate into, or spit into, or wash their hands in. This is Herodotus at his most characteristic: some of it sharp observation, some of it a Greek arranging foreigners into a pattern, all of it offered as what he has heard and seen.

PACTYAS, AND THE CITIES THAT WOULD NOT GIVE A MAN UP

After Sardis, Cyrus left a Persian, Tabalus, in charge, and a Lydian, **Pactyas**, to bring in the gold. He himself went east, towards Babylon and the Bactrians and the Sacae, which he thought the real war. Pactyas raised the Lydians and besieged Tabalus in the citadel, using the treasure he was supposed to deliver. Cyrus was ready to sell the whole people into slavery. Croesus, now the adviser, begged him not to destroy an ancient city that had done nothing, and proposed a softer ruin: take their arms, make them wear tunics under their cloaks, teach them to play the lyre and the pipe and to shop, and they will cease to be a threat. Cyrus laughed, and agreed, and sent Mazares to put the revolt down.

Pactyas fled to Cyme. The Cymaeans asked Branchidae what to do with him, and the oracle said, give him up. A man of Cyme, Aristodicus, did not trust an answer that ugly. He went back, and drove the sparrows and other birds out of the temple until a voice asked him how he dared empty a sanctuary of its suppliants. He answered that the god protected his own suppliants and ordered the Cymaeans to betray theirs. The reply, as Herodotus gives it, was that the oracle had named the surrender so that the Cymaeans would commit the impiety and perish, and not come asking such things again. They would not give Pactyas up. They sent him to Mytilene, and when Mytilene looked ready to sell him, to Chios. The Chians dragged him from the sanctuary of Athena and handed him over for a tract of mainland. A long time afterward no Chian would use barley from that land in a sacrifice.

Mazares died, and Harpagus took the coast. The Ionian cities fell one by one, some by siege, some by the undermining of walls, the Phocaeans sailing away rather than submit, the Teians doing the same. The islanders gave themselves up for fear. So the Greek cities of Asia, which Croesus had ruled and which Cyrus had not yet bothered to court, passed under Persia. When they later asked Sparta for help, the Spartans sent a single ship and a warning to Cyrus not to harm any city of Greece. Cyrus asked who the Spartans were, and being told, said he did not fear men who had a place in the middle of their city where they met to cheat one another on oath. He meant the market. Persians, he said, had no such habit.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Cyrus wins the Persians by making them live one hard day and one easy day. Why is a demonstration more persuasive than a promise?
2. Croesus advises Cyrus to unman Lydia with music and shopping. Is Herodotus mocking Lydians, or showing how a conquered adviser saves his people by insulting them?
3. The oracle tells Cyme to surrender a suppliant, then explains that the order was a trap. Can you trust a god who answers like that?

CHAPTER 8: BABYLON, AND THE QUEEN WHO ASKED FOR BLOOD

Cyrus turned to Assyria, and to **Babylon**, which Herodotus describes as if he had walked it, and which he may have. The city stood in a great plain, a square of enormous walls, a hundred cubits high in his figures, with a hundred bronze gates, the Euphrates running through the middle, a bridge of fitted stones, and the temple of Zeus Belus still standing in his day: a tower of eight stages, with a shrine at the top and a couch in it, where no human image stood and where a woman slept, chosen by the god, so the priests said, from the women of the country. He reports a marriage custom that later readers have argued over ever since: once a year the girls of marriageable age were gathered, and the herald sold the most beautiful first, then the next, and with the money from the beauties he paid the men who would take the ones no one bid for. He presents it as their wisest custom. A modern reader is allowed to refuse the compliment.

Historian's Note: The marriage market

Herodotus is often at his most confident when he is describing a custom that startles a Greek. The Babylonian auction of brides is famous, and it is not confirmed as he tells it. Treat it as he asks you to treat wonders: here is what I was told, and here is the shape of a society that talked about daughters as a public distribution. The walls and the staged tower have a firmer archaeological echo. His measurements are too large.

THE RIVER AS A ROAD

He marched on Babylon. The Babylonians met him, lost, and shut themselves in, with food stored for many years, not much troubled by a siege. Cyrus was troubled. Then he did, or was said to do, the thing the city had not planned for. He drew the Euphrates off into a lake the queen Nitocris had dug above the city, and when the river sank to about thigh-depth he sent his army in along the bed, where the walls broke for the stream. The Babylonians were in the middle of a festival. They did not know the outer parts of the city had fallen until they were taken. So Babylon fell, in his account, to a lowered river and a feast. He gives Cyrus the city, and the next design.

TOMYRIS

The next design was the **Massagetae**, across the Araxes, a great and brave people, ruled by a queen, **Tomyris** (*TOM-ih-ris*), whose husband was dead. Cyrus sent to ask for her in marriage. She understood that he wanted the kingdom, and refused. He advanced to the river. She offered him a clean choice: come three days' march into her country, and she would withdraw, or let her come three days into his. His Persian advisers said to let her cross. Croesus said the opposite. If you let her in and lose, you lose the empire as well as the battle, because the Massagetae will not stop. Cross yourself. And do not fight their hunger with your steel only. Leave a camp full of food and wine, undefended, and take them when the wine has taken them. They have no experience of such good things.

Cyrus crossed. Before he did, he dreamed that Darius, son of Hystaspes, had wings on his shoulders, one shadowing Asia and one Europe. He told Hystaspes to watch the young man. He was looking at the wrong generation of danger. He also sent Croesus home to his own son, in case

the crossing went badly.

The plan worked, at first. A third of the Massagetae army took the camp, ate, drank, slept, and were killed or captured. Among the prisoners was Spargapises, the queen's son. Tomyris sent a herald. Give him back, she said, and leave this land, and be glad you have cheated a third of my army. If you do not, I swear by the sun, the lord of the Massagetae, I will give you your fill of blood, insatiable as you are.

Cyrus paid no attention. Spargapises, when the wine left him and he saw where he was, asked to have his bonds taken off. They were. He killed himself. Then the armies met, and Herodotus calls it the fiercest battle ever fought between non-Greeks. They shot away their arrows and closed, with spears and daggers, and would not give ground. At last the Massagetae won. Most of the Persian army was destroyed there, and Cyrus himself died, after twenty-nine years of reign.

Tomyris filled a skin with human blood, and searched the dead until she found his body. She pushed his head into the skin, and said: I threatened you with blood, and you have it. You destroyed me by a trick, living, when you took my son. I destroy you, as I swore, and I fill you with blood.

There are other accounts of Cyrus's death, Herodotus admits, and he has given the one he finds most credible. The man who had taken Lydia because an oracle was ambiguous, and Babylon because a river could be moved, died at the edge of the map, in a war he did not have to fight, against a queen who had offered him a fair field and then kept her oath. Solon's sentence had not been for Croesus only.

THREE CONQUESTS, THREE DIFFERENT WEAPONS

Place	What beat it	Who understood the danger
Sardis	Camels, a forgotten path, an ambiguous oracle	Sandanis, unheard
Babylon	A diverted river and a festival	The defenders, too confident in their stores
The Massagetae	Nothing. Cyrus died	Tomyris, and Croesus, half-heard

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Herodotus praises the Babylonian marriage auction as their wisest custom. What does that praise reveal about him, and about the people he is describing?
2. Tomyris offers Cyrus a choice of ground and then, after a trick, a skin of blood. Is her ending justice, revenge, or a warning about insatiable kings?
3. Cyrus dreams of Darius's wings and worries about the wrong man. Why do Herodotus's rulers so often look in the wrong direction?