



MYTHOPOUCH

RETELLING

HERODOTUS: THE HISTORIES

COMPLETE TEXT

Chapters 1-32

A modern educational version for readers aged 15 and up

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CHAPTER 1: SO THAT THE DEEDS DO NOT FADE

This is the inquiry of **Herodotus** (*heh-ROD-oh-tus*) of Halicarnassus. He wrote it so that what people have done should not be rubbed out by time, and so that the great and astonishing works of Greeks and non-Greeks should not go without a name. Above all, he wanted to set down why they went to war with one another.

Read that first sentence again. It is one of the most ambitious openings in literature. Herodotus is not promising a chronicle of kings and dates. He is promising an *inquiry*, in Greek, an *historie*, which is where the English word history comes from. An inquiry asks questions. It travels. It listens to people who disagree. And it refuses to let either side of a quarrel own the whole story.

A WORD HE USES, AND A WORD WE WILL NOT HIDE

Herodotus calls everyone who is not Greek a **barbarian**. The word did not mean what a modern reader hears. It began as a description of speech: to a Greek ear, foreign languages sounded like *bar-bar*, a noise without meaning. So a barbarian was a foreigner. Persians, Egyptians, Lydians, Scythians, all barbarians, in his mouth, and some of them he admires more than he admires Greeks. This retelling will say *non-Greek* or name the people, and will keep his word when the point is the Greek habit of sorting the world into us and everyone else.

FOUR ABDUCTIONS, AND A THEORY OF THE WAR

The learned men of Persia, he says, traced the quarrel back to the **Phoenicians** (*foh-NEE-shuns*). They had come from the Red Sea coast to the Mediterranean, settled, and taken to long voyages, carrying Egyptian and Assyrian goods. They put in at **Argos**, which in those days outshone every state later called Greek. On the fifth or sixth day, when the cargo was nearly sold, a crowd of women came down to the shore. Among them was the king's daughter, **Io** (*EYE-oh*), child of Inachus.

While the women bargained at the stern, the Phoenicians rushed them. Most escaped. Io and some others were seized, thrown aboard, and carried to Egypt. That, say the Persians, was the first wrong.

Later, certain Greeks (Cretans, the Persians think, though they cannot name them) put in at Tyre and carried off the king's daughter **Europa**. So far, they say, the score was even. Then Greeks sailed a warship to Aea in Colchis, on the river Phasis, and after their other business carried off the king's daughter **Medea**. The king of Colchis sent a herald to demand her back and satisfaction for the seizure. The Greeks answered that Asia had given no satisfaction for Io, and they would give none for Medea.

In the next generation, **Alexander**, whom the Greeks call Paris, son of Priam, heard these stories and decided he might take a wife from Greece by force. He would not have to pay, he thought, because the Greeks had not paid. He carried off **Helen**. The Greeks sent messengers to demand her and satisfaction. The answer came back as an accusation: you gave no satisfaction for Medea, and you refused it when it was asked, and now you want it for yourselves.

Up to that point, say the Persians, there had only been seizures on both sides. After that the Greeks were greatly to blame, because they levied a war on Asia before Asia levied one on Europe. To seize women by violence, the Persians hold, is the act of wicked men. To make a fuss about avenging them is the act of fools. To pay the matter no regard is the act of wise men, for if the women had not been willing, they could not have been carried off. Asia, they say, made no account of the women who were taken. The Greeks, for the sake of one Spartan woman, gathered a great fleet, came to Asia, and overthrew the kingdom of Priam. From that day the Persians counted the Greeks as enemies. Asia and the peoples who live in it they claim as their own. Europe, and the Greek people, they count as something else entirely.

Historian's Note: Abduction is not a love story

Herodotus is reporting a Persian explanation, not endorsing it. The claim that a seized woman must have been willing is an old excuse, and he lets you hear it. Io, Europa, Medea, and Helen are not decorations. In this telling they are the pretext great powers use when they want a war. Ages 15 and up: the violence here is seizure and the politics built on it, not a romance.

THE PHOENICIANS DISAGREE

On Io, the Phoenicians do not accept the Persian account. They say they used no violence. She had a connection at Argos with the master of a ship, found herself pregnant, and sailed with them of her own accord, afraid of her parents. Such are the Persian and Phoenician stories.

Herodotus will not inquire whether they happened. He has a different method. He will name the man he himself knows to have been the first to commit injustice against the Greeks, and then go on with the history, touching small states and great ones alike. Of those who were once powerful, many have become weak. Some who were powerful in his own time were weak before. Human prosperity is a precarious thing. He will commemorate both.

That refusal is the real beginning of the book. He has shown you the myths. He has shown you that each side tells them to its own advantage. Then he steps past them. The first man he will hold responsible is not Paris and not a Phoenician trader. It is **Croesus** (*KREE-sus*), king of Lydia.

THE FOUR SEIZURES, AS THE PERSIANS TELL THEM

Woman	Taken from	Taken by	What it is said to answer
Io	Argos	Phoenicians	The first wrong, Asia against Europe
Europa	Tyre	Greeks, said to be Cretans	A repayment
Medea	Colchis	Greeks in a warship	The second Greek provocation
Helen	Sparta	Paris of Troy	The pretext for a Greek war on Asia

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Herodotus opens by promising an inquiry, not a verdict. What is the difference, and why might it matter when two nations are already sure they know who started a war?
2. The Persian speakers treat the seizure of women as wicked, and the avenging of it as foolish. What does that argument do to Io, Europa, Medea, and Helen? Who gets to speak in this story, and who does not?
3. Herodotus says he will record the weak as well as the strong, because prosperity does not stay put. Can you think of a modern state, company, or reputation that seemed permanent and was not?

CHAPTER 2: THE KING WHO COULD NOT LOOK AWAY

Croesus was a Lydian, son of Alyattes, and lord of the peoples west of the river **Halys** (*HAY-lis*). That river runs between the Syrians (Herodotus means the people of Cappadocia) and the Paphlagonians, and empties north into the Black Sea, which the Greeks called the Euxine. Croesus was the first non-Greek, so far as Herodotus knows, who made some Greeks pay tribute and bound others to him by alliance. He subdued the Ionians, the Aeolians, and the Dorians settled in Asia, and he made a treaty with the Spartans. Before him, the Greeks were free. An earlier raid by the Cimmerians had been for plunder, not for rule.

The throne had not always belonged to his house. It had belonged to the **Heraclidae**, a line that claimed descent from Heracles, and it passed to the family called the **Mermnadae** in a way that still makes people look at the floor.

CANDAULES AND THE BODYGUARD

Candaules (*kan-DAW-leez*), whom the Greeks call Myrsilus, was tyrant of Sardis, last of the Heraclidae. He was in love with his own wife, and being in love he thought her the most beautiful of women. He had a bodyguard, **Gyges** (*JY-jeez*), son of Dascylus, whom he trusted with his greatest affairs, and to this man he praised his wife's beauty past all measure.

In time (for Candaules was fated to come to grief) he said to Gyges: you do not believe me when I speak of her beauty. Men's ears are less trusting than their eyes. You must contrive to see her naked.

Gyges cried out. What a proposal, to bid him look on his queen without her clothes. A woman, he said, puts off her modesty with her dress. Old maxims tell a man to look to his own business. He believed she was the most beautiful of her sex. He begged not to be asked to do a wicked thing.

The king told him to take courage. This was not a test, and the queen would not know. Gyges would stand behind the open door of the room where they slept. She would come to bed and lay her clothes, one by one, on a chair near the entrance. He might look at his leisure. When she stepped from the chair to the bed, and he was at her back, he was to slip out. He must not let her see him go.

Gyges could not escape the order. He obeyed. He saw her enter and lay her clothes on the chair. As she went towards the bed he crept away, and she saw him going. She understood what her husband had done. She did not cry out. Among the Lydians, and among most peoples the Greeks called foreign, to be seen naked was a deep disgrace, even for a man. She held her peace, and decided that Candaules would pay.

TWO CHOICES, AND NO GOOD ONE

At daybreak she sent for Gyges, having first prepared the servants she trusted. He came, thinking she knew nothing. She set two proposals before him. Kill Candaules, and take her and the kingdom of Lydia. Or die at once, so that he would not again see what he ought not to have seen, in obedience to Candaules. Either the man who planned it must die, or the man who had seen her

and done what was not decent.

Gyges begged not to be forced to the choice. She would not be moved. He saw that he must kill his master or be killed. He chose to live, and asked how. The attack, she said, would be made from the very place where the king had shown her naked, and it would be made while he slept.

That night she hid Gyges behind the same door and put a dagger in his hand. There was no leaving. One of the two men had to die. When Candaules slept, Gyges came out and killed him, and took the woman and the throne.

Historian's Note: A story about looking

Herodotus tells this without lingering. The shock is not the body. It is the use of it. Candaules treats his wife's privacy as a possession he can lend. She treats the looking as an injury that must be answered in blood. Gyges is the man in the doorway, ordered by one power and then by the other. The poet Archilochus of Paros, who lived about the same time, mentioned the deed. Herodotus is already doing what he promised: setting a version beside the fact that other people told it too.

THE ORACLE KEEPS THE RECEIPT

The Lydians did not all accept a murdered king. The two parties agreed to put the matter to Delphi. If the oracle named Gyges king, he would reign. If not, the power would go back to the Heraclidae. The oracle confirmed him. It added a line that nobody wanted to keep: the Heraclidae would be avenged in the fifth generation of Gyges. Neither the Lydians nor their kings paid the warning any notice until it was fulfilled.

Count forward. Gyges, then Ardys, then Sadyattes, then Alyattes, then Croesus. The fifth. The story of the doorway is not a side tale. It is the debt on which the rest of Book One is written.

FROM THE DOORWAY TO THE DEBT

Person	What they want	What it costs
Candaules	To be believed about his wife's beauty	His life, and his house's throne
Gyges	To refuse, and then to survive	His master, and a curse on the fifth generation
The queen	An answer to being shown	A dead husband, and a new king of her choosing
Delphi	To settle a civil quarrel	A confirmation, and a delayed revenge

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Gyges calls the king's order wicked, then obeys it, then kills the king to save himself. At which point, if any, does he become responsible?
2. The queen neither cries out nor pretends the injury did not happen. Why might silence have been the more dangerous choice?

3. Delphi confirms a usurper and postpones the punishment for five generations. What does that do to the idea that oracles are simply on the side of justice?

CHAPTER 3: THE HOUSE OF GYGES, AND A SINGER SAVED BY A DOLPHIN

So the Mermnadae held the throne. Gyges sent offerings to Delphi, a great quantity of silver and gold, and six golden bowls weighing thirty talents, which stood in the treasury people called Corinthian, though in truth it belonged to Cypselus. He was the first non-Greek Herodotus knows of who dedicated gifts at Delphi, except **Midas** of Phrygia, son of Gordius, who had given the throne on which he sat to give judgement. Gyges made war on Miletus and Smyrna and took Colophon. He reigned thirty-eight years, and did nothing else Herodotus thinks worth the telling. The inquiry has a ruthless edit. It keeps what carries the story.

Ardys, his son, took Priene and invaded Miletus. In his reign the **Cimmerians**, driven from their lands by nomad Scythians, poured into Asia and seized Sardis except the citadel. He reigned forty-nine years. **Sadyattes**, his son, reigned twelve. Then came **Alyattes**.

A WAR FOUGHT WITH FLUTES

Alyattes fought the Medes under Cyaxares, drove the Cimmerians out of Asia, took Smyrna, and was badly beaten at Clazomenae. He also inherited his father's war on Miletus, and fought it in a strange way. When the crops were ripe he marched in with pipes, harps, and flutes, men's and women's. He did not burn the farmhouses or tear off the doors. He destroyed the trees and the fruit, and went home. The Milesians held the sea, so a siege was useless. And he left the houses standing so that the Milesians would come out and sow again, and there would be something to ruin next year.

Eleven years of this. Two heavy Milesian defeats, one at Limeneion, one in the plain of the Maeander. Only the Chians helped Miletus, paying back an old favour. In the twelfth year the army set fire to the corn, and the wind carried the flames into the temple of Athena at Assesus. It burned to the ground. No one marked it. Then Alyattes fell ill, and the illness held. He sent to Delphi. The priestess would not answer until the burned temple was rebuilt.

Herodotus had this from the Delphians. The Milesians add that Periander of Corinth, friend of Thrasybulus, king of Miletus, heard the oracle and warned him. Thrasybulus gathered all the corn in the city, his own and everyone else's, into the market, and ordered a public feast the moment the Lydian herald arrived. The herald saw abundance and celebration, and reported it. Alyattes, who had expected a starved city, made peace instead, built two temples of Athena where one had stood, and recovered.

Historian's Note: Two versions, both kept

This is Herodotus working in the open. Delphi says one thing. Miletus says the peace also depended on a friend's warning and a staged feast. He does not smash the two accounts together into a single clean fact. He tells you who told him which. That habit (name the source, keep the disagreement) is why later writers both trusted him and accused him of being too fond of a story.

ARION AND THE DOLPHIN

Periander, son of Cypselus, was tyrant of Corinth, and the Corinthians, confirmed by the Lesbians, tell a wonder from his time. **Arion** of Methymna was the finest singer to the harp of his day, and the first man Herodotus knows of who composed the dithyramb, trained a chorus, and produced it in Corinth. He spent most of his life with Periander, then decided to sail to Italy and Sicily. He made a great deal of money, and hired a Corinthian crew to take him home, trusting Corinthians above other men.

Out at sea they plotted to throw him overboard and keep the money. He begged for his life and offered them the fortune. They would not take it. He must die, they said, or throw himself over if he wanted a grave on land. Driven to it, he asked to sing once more in full costume, standing on the after-deck, and promised to kill himself afterward. They agreed, glad to hear the best singer alive. He put on his robes, took his lyre, stood at the stern, sang the Orthian nome, and when it ended threw himself into the sea as he was, costume and all.

The crew sailed on to Corinth. A dolphin, the story says, took Arion on its back and carried him to Taenarum. He went ashore and made his way to Corinth, still in his singing robes, and told Periander. The tyrant kept him under guard, disbelieved, and watched for the sailors. When they arrived he asked after Arion. They said he was well, left behind in Italy. Arion stepped out in the same dress he had worn when he leapt. They were caught, and could not deny it. A small bronze figure of a man on a dolphin stood at Taenarum, dedicated by Arion.

Herodotus does not say he saw the dolphin. He says the Corinthians and Lesbians tell it, and that there is a dedication. Believe the wonder, or believe that a famous singer survived a robbery and that a city liked the better story. He gives you both the tale and the little bronze.

THE MERMNADAE, TO THE GENERATION DELPHI NAMED

King	Reign, as Herodotus gives it	What he keeps
Gyges	38 years	Delphi's gifts, Colophon, the curse
Ardys	49 years	Priene, Miletus, the Cimmerians in Sardis
Sadyattes	12 years	The start of the long war on Miletus
Alyattes	57 years	The flute-war, the burned temple, the peace
Croesus	the fifth	The man the warning was waiting for

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Alyattes burns crops and spares houses so that the enemy can plant again. Is that restraint, or a colder kind of war?
2. Thrasybulus wins a peace by showing a herald a feast. What does the trick assume about how kings get their information?
3. Herodotus reports the dolphin story and the bronze offering, and does not say which proves the other. How should a reader hold a story like that?

CHAPTER 4: CROESUS, SOLON, AND THE HAPPIEST MAN

Alyattes died after fifty-seven years, and **Croesus** inherited a war with Ephesus and a kingdom that already reached farther than his fathers'. He attacked the Ephesians first, and they ran a rope from their walls to the temple of Artemis, putting the city under the goddess's protection. He subdued the Ionians and Aeolians of the mainland one by one, on different pretexts, real where he could find them and thin where he could not. He planned ships against the islanders, and dropped the plan when Bias of Priene (or Pittacus of Mytilene, for the accounts differ) told him the islanders were buying horses to attack him on land. Croesus was delighted by the absurdity, and the visitor said: exactly; and what do you think they feel, hearing you mean to meet them at sea? Croesus, who was no fool except in the ways that mattered, made a treaty with the Ionians of the islands instead.

In time almost every people west of the Halys was under him. Sardis was at the height of its wealth, and the scholars of Greece began to arrive, among them **Solon** (*SOH-lon*) of Athens, who had written laws for his city and then left for ten years so that no one could force him to change them. He came, in Herodotus's account, to see the world.

COUNT NO ONE HAPPY UNTIL THE END

Croesus entertained him, and on the third or fourth day had his servants walk Solon through the treasuries. Then he asked the question he had been waiting to ask. Solon had travelled. Who was the happiest man he had seen?

He expected the answer to be himself. Solon named **Tellus** of Athens. Tellus had lived in a flourishing city, had fine sons, and lived to see children born to each of them, and all of them survived. He had a comfortable fortune. He died beautifully, by an Athenian's measure: in a battle at Eleusis he routed the enemy and died in the fighting, and the Athenians buried him at public cost where he fell, and honoured him greatly.

Croesus, annoyed, asked who was second, quite sure of the place. Solon named **Cleobis** and **Biton**. They were Argives, strong, and prize-winners, and the story told of them was this. There was a festival of Hera, and their mother had to be drawn to the temple in an ox-cart. The oxen were not back from the field. The young men put themselves under the yoke and hauled the cart forty-five stades to the sanctuary. The whole festival saw them. The men congratulated them on their strength. The women told their mother she was happy in her sons. Standing before the image, she asked the goddess to give them the best thing a human being can receive. After the sacrifice and the feast they lay down in the temple and did not wake. The Argives set up statues of them at Delphi.

Croesus was angry now. And my happiness, he said, you count as nothing beside private men? Solon answered that the divine is jealous, and likes to trouble what is human. In a long life a man sees and suffers much he would rather not. Seventy years come to twenty-six thousand two hundred and fifty days, and not one of those days is like another. The fortunate man is not the rich man. Wealth lets you ride out a disaster and satisfy a desire; a poor man cannot. But the lucky man

must also end well. Until a man is dead, hold back, and do not call him happy. Call him lucky. Look to the end of every matter, to see how it will come out. The god has shown many a man a glimpse of happiness and then overturned him.

Croesus sent him away, thinking him a fool, a man who threw away present good and told a king to wait for the end.

Historian's Note: Did Solon really visit Croesus?

The dates are awkward. Solon's reforms and travels sit earlier than Croesus's reign in most modern reckonings, and later writers already suspected the meeting was too perfect. Herodotus may be using a famous wise man to stage the argument the book needs: prosperity is not happiness, and the end has not happened yet. Whether or not the conversation occurred, it is the moral engine of the Croesus story.

THE BOAR, THE GUEST, AND THE SPEAR

After Solon left, a vengeance from the god fell on Croesus, as Herodotus tells it, because he had thought himself the happiest of men. He dreamed that his son **Atys** would be killed by an iron spear-point. He had the young man married, kept him from campaigns, moved the spears and javelins out of the men's rooms, and stacked them where they would not fall on anyone.

While he was arranging the wedding, a man arrived in Sardis under a pollution. He was **Adrastus**, a Phrygian of the royal house, who had killed his own brother by mischance and been driven out by his father. Croesus purified him in the Lydian rite and took him in.

Then a great boar came down from Olympus in Mysia and tore up the fields. The Mysians asked Croesus for his son and a picked band. Croesus remembered the dream and refused to send Atys. The young man heard, and came to his father. Hunting was not war, he said. What spear-point was there in a boar? Croesus confessed the dream. Atys answered that a boar has no hands and no iron. The dream had spoken of a spear-point. Croesus was persuaded. He called Adrastus and asked him to watch over the boy. Adrastus did not want to go. He was a man in misfortune, and he had no wish to be seen among lucky young men. He went because a guest cannot refuse the host who purified him.

They found the boar and ringed it. Adrastus threw his spear. He missed the boar and hit the king's son. So the dream was fulfilled, and the killer was the man Croesus had purified, the guest he had sent as a guard.

Croesus, when the news came, was wild with grief, and called on Zeus of purification, Zeus of the hearth, and Zeus of friendship, because the same guest had violated all three. When the body was brought in, Adrastus stood before it, stretched out his hands, gave himself up, and begged to be slaughtered over the corpse. Croesus pitied him, though his own sorrow was as great as any man's. You are not to blame, he said. Some god is, who warned me of what was coming. Adrastus waited until the funeral was quiet. Then, judging himself the most ruined of men, he killed himself on the tomb.

Croesus sat in his grief for two years. Then the rise of Cyrus, son of Cambyses, and the overthrow of Astyages, woke him. He would stop the Persian growth if he could, before it grew greater. The end Solon had told him to wait for was already walking towards Sardis. He did not yet know its name.

SOLON'S RANKING, AND WHY IT OFFENDS A KING

Rank	Who	Why Solon counts them happy
First	Tellus of Athens	A good city, living sons, a fine death, a public grave
Second	Cleobis and Biton	Strength used for their mother, and a death the god gave as the best gift
Not yet	Croesus	Richer than both, and still alive, so the story is unfinished

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Solon refuses to call a living man happy. Is that wisdom, or a way of never having to praise anyone who can hear you?
2. Cleobis and Biton are given death as the best gift. Do you accept that ending as happiness, or does the story only work inside a Greek idea of fame?
3. Croesus tries to outwit the dream by keeping iron away from his son, and then sends the son out with a man carrying a spear. What does the story suggest about trying to dodge a warning?

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?

CHAPTER 9: THE COUNTRY THE RIVER GIVES

After Cyrus died, the kingship passed to his son **Cambyses**. Herodotus does not follow him yet. Cambyses is about to invade Egypt, and Egypt, in this book, is not a preface. It is a world. Book Two is the longest pause in the Histories, and the most famous. Herodotus says he will lengthen the story because Egypt has more wonders than any other land, and works beyond telling.

He begins with the water. The **Nile** floods in summer, when other rivers fall, and no one he has met can explain it to his satisfaction. The Greek theories annoy him. One says the etesian winds dam the current. He objects that the flood happens in years when the winds fail, and that other rivers under the same winds do not rise. Another says the Nile flows from Ocean, the river that runs around the world. He calls this less an explanation than a retreat into the unknown, and says he knows of no river Ocean. A third says the flood is meltwater from snow. He laughs. The Nile comes from the hottest part of the world. That is where snow is least likely.

His own guess (and he marks it as a guess) is that the sun, driven from its course in winter, passes closer to the upper Nile and dries it, and that in summer the river returns to its full size. He is wrong. The flood is the rainy season on the Ethiopian highlands, far to the south, which he has not seen. What matters is the method. He sets out the rival accounts, says why he rejects them, and then offers his own with a lower voice.

WHO IS OLDER

He holds, with what he has seen, that the Egyptians were the first people to exist, except in the Thebaid, where the soil is a later gift of the river. He has **Psammetichus** (*sam-MET-ih-kus*) as a witness of a peculiar kind. The king wanted to know who were the oldest people, and devised a test a modern reader will find cruel. He gave two newborn children of ordinary parents to a shepherd, with orders that no one speak in their hearing. They were to be kept in a hut alone, goats brought in to give them milk, and the shepherd was to listen for the first word. In the second year, when he opened the door, both children reached out and said *bekos*. He reported it. Psammetichus asked and learned that *bekos* was the Phrygian word for bread. The Egyptians, the story goes, accepted that the Phrygians were older than themselves, and claimed the second place. Herodotus had this from the priests of Hephaestus at Memphis. The Greeks tell a foolish version, he says, in which the children's nurse was a woman with her tongue cut out.

Historian's Note: The experiment

This is not science, and it is not kind. It assumes that an untaught child will speak the original language of humankind, as if language were planted rather than learned. What it shows is an Egyptian king, in a Greek telling, using bodies to settle a question of prestige. Herodotus reports it because both sides cared who was first. The flood theory is the fairer sample of his mind: he can be magnificently wrong in the open.

The priests also gave him a list of kings, three hundred and thirty names from Min to Sethos, and showed him the statues. They said that in all that time the sun had twice risen where it now sets, without the Egyptian way of life changing. He does not press the astronomy. He takes the point they want him to take. Egypt thinks in a longer time than Greece.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Herodotus rejects three explanations of the Nile and offers a fourth that is also wrong. Why is that still a more useful chapter than a chapter that only repeats a marvel?
2. The Psammetichus experiment treats children as instruments. What question was the king really asking, and what did he fail to ask?
3. Egypt claims a past so long that the sky itself has reversed. Why would a Greek visitor, from a younger world of stories, be hungry for that claim?

CHAPTER 10: A PEOPLE WHO DO THINGS THE OTHER WAY

Herodotus's Egypt is a mirror held up to Greece, and he enjoys the reversals. Women go to market and trade. Men weave, at home. Other people push the woof upward; Egyptians push it down. Women carry loads on their shoulders, men on their heads. Sons are not required to support their parents; daughters are. They knead dough with their feet and clay with their hands. They relieve themselves indoors and eat outdoors. Priests shave their whole bodies instead of letting their hair grow. They write from right to left. In all this he is collecting difference, and sometimes inventing a neatness the country did not have. He is also, more quietly, telling a Greek reader that nature is not the same thing as habit.

They are, he says, the most religious people he knows. They drink from bronze cups, scoured daily, and wear linen, always freshly washed, because wool is unclean for a sanctuary. Priests bathe in cold water twice a day and twice a night. The name of almost every Greek god, he reports the priests as saying, came to Greece from Egypt. He is not in a position to prove it, and he sometimes forces a match, Egyptian Amun with Zeus, Horus with Apollo, Isis with Demeter. The impulse is serious. He does not think Greece invented the gods.

ANIMALS, DOCTORS, AND THE DEAD

Animals have law around them. To kill an ibis or a hawk, even by accident, is death. Cats who die are taken to sacred buildings and buried, often at Bubastis. Dogs go to their own towns of burial. Field mice and hawks go to Buto. He tells of a fire in which the Egyptians stood in a line grieving for the cats, and did not fight the flames, and of cats hurling themselves into the burning. He tells of the crocodile, feared in some places and kept as a sacred creature in others, with earrings and bracelets on its forefeet and food appointed it. He tells of the phoenix as a story he does not quite believe: a bird from Arabia once every five hundred years, carrying its father packed in myrrh, to bury him at the temple of the sun.

Medicine is specialised to a degree that startles him. One doctor for the eyes, one for the head, one for the teeth, one for the belly, one for hidden diseases. Embalming he describes in three grades, by price. The dearest draws out the brain with an iron hook, makes a cut in the flank with a sharp Ethiopian stone, removes the organs except the heart and kidneys, rinses with palm wine and pounded spices, sews the body up, and packs it seventy days in natron. The middle grade injects oil and lets it dissolve what it can. The cheapest purges the body and returns it. He has been shown the workshops. This is one of the places where he is closest to a reporter.

Historian's Note: Sacred animals and a Greek gaze

Egyptian religion did treat certain animals as manifestations of gods, and animal cemeteries are real. The details (earrings on crocodiles, cats throwing themselves into fires) are where spectacle enters. Read the embalming passage as the best of him: a practice, three prices, a tool named, a number of days. Read the reversals as a method that can harden into a cartoon. Both are in the same book.

He adds customs that are not Egyptian alone, so that the mirror does not become a cage. The Persians will not pollute a river. The Massagetae have their own rites of the dead. Difference is the

subject, not a verdict that Egypt is upside down and Greece is upright.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Herodotus lists Egyptian habits as the reverse of Greek ones. When does a list of differences become a way of not seeing the people described?
2. He is most believable when he describes a workshop, and least when he describes a wonder. How can you tell, inside his own sentences, which mood he is in?
3. Specialist doctors and graded embalming suggest a society with institutions, not only marvels. What else in this chapter is an institution rather than a curiosity?

CHAPTER 11: KINGS, A THIEF, AND THE PYRAMID BUILDERS

The priests gave him kings in a chain, and he keeps the ones with a story. **Min** first, who dammed the Nile and founded Memphis. Queen **Nitocris**, who avenged her brother by inviting his killers to a banquet in an underground chamber and letting the river in on them, and who then, the Egyptians say, threw herself into a room of ashes so that no further vengeance could find her. **Sesostris**, the conquering king, who set pillars in the lands he subdued, marked with the female sign if the people had not fought, and who came home to find his brother had plotted against him and escaped a burning house because his wife told him to lay two of their six sons across the flames as a bridge. Herodotus admires the escape and does not soften the price.

THE BUILDER AND THE THIEF

King **Rhampsinitus**, rich beyond the kings before him, built a stone treasury and left one stone so that it could be removed by two men and by no one else. The builder, dying, told his two sons the secret. They opened the wall, and took. The king set traps. One brother was caught. He told the other to cut off his head, so the corpse could not be recognised and the family ruined. The king hung the headless body on the wall and set guards, expecting grief to betray someone. The mother demanded the body. The surviving son got the guards drunk, shaved the right cheek of each of them as an insult, and brought his brother home.

The king, astonished more than angry, offered his daughter to whoever could tell the cleverest crime, meaning to catch the man in the telling. The thief came, and escaped a grab by leaving a severed arm (his dead brother's) in her hand. Then the king pardoned him and gave him the daughter, judging Egypt richer in such a man than in money. Herodotus says he does not believe the Egyptians here. He tells the story anyway. That sentence is almost a method all by itself.

CHEOPS AND THE YEARS OF THE STONE

Until **Rhampsinitus**, they said, Egypt was well governed. **Cheops** closed the temples, forbade sacrifice, and set the people to labour. Some dragged stone from the Arabian hills to the Nile. Others received it and hauled it to the Libyan hills. A hundred thousand men at a time, changed every three months, for ten years on the road alone, and twenty on the pyramid. Herodotus gives the measurements, the machines that lifted the stones course by course, and a legend he marks as distasteful: that Cheops, running out of money, sent his daughter to a chamber to collect a fee, and that she asked each man for a stone, and built the middle pyramid of the three in front of the great one from what she was paid. He has been into the pyramid, he says, as far as the chamber, up a narrow passage.

Chephren succeeded, and ruled in the same manner, and built the second pyramid, forty feet lower, with no chambers beneath, and the first course of Ethiopian stone. The Egyptians do not like to name these two. They call the pyramids after a shepherd, Philitis, who pastured there. **Mycerinus**, son of Cheops, opened the temples and judged justly, and came to grief for it. An oracle gave him six years to live, because Egypt was fated to be afflicted for a hundred and fifty years and he had not understood. He stayed awake at night, they say, to double what he had left. He built the third pyramid, smaller, and fairer, of Ethiopian stone to half its height.

Historian's Note: Khufu, Khafre, Menkaure

Cheops, Chephren, and Mycerinus are the Greek forms of Khufu, Khafre, and Menkaure, kings of the Fourth Dynasty, more than two thousand years before Herodotus. The pyramids are theirs. The closed temples, the daughter's chamber, and the oracle of six years are later talk, some of it hostile. He is honest about having measured and entered. He is not in a position to know the building accounts. The labour was real. The cartoon of a tyrant who prostituted his daughter is not how you should leave the Old Kingdom.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Herodotus says he does not believe the tale of Rhampsinitus, and tells it at length. What is the point of recording a story you reject?
2. The pyramids are described both as measurements and as moral judgements. Which description has aged better, and why?
3. Mycerinus is punished for ruling more gently than his father. What picture of fate does that oracle assume?

CHAPTER 12: FROM THE TWELVE KINGS TO AMASIS

Egypt broke, in his long backward look, into twelve kings, who ruled in friendship and built the labyrinth above Lake Moeris, which Herodotus says he saw and which outdid even the pyramids in labour. They were not to depose one another. An oracle said the one who poured a libation from a bronze helmet would rule alone. The twelve were sacrificing, and the priest came short of golden cups. **Psammetichus**, standing aside, took off his bronze helmet and used it. He did not do it as a claim. The others understood the oracle better than he wished, and drove him into the marshes. He came back with Ionian and Carian bronze-men, sea-raiders in armour, whom an oracle had told him to trust, and with them he became sole king. He gave the strangers land and a settlement, and from them the Greeks in Egypt learned the country, and he sent Egyptian boys to learn Greek. Herodotus thinks this is how his own sources began: a king who needed interpreters.

His son **Neco** tried a canal from the Nile to the Red Sea, and stopped when an oracle warned him he was working for the barbarian, meaning, in the end, the Persian. He turned to war, and sent Phoenicians, Herodotus reports, to sail around Libya, which is to say Africa. They went south from the Red Sea, and returned in the third year through the pillars of Heracles, and said that as they sailed west they had the sun on their right hand. Herodotus does not believe that detail. It is one of the details a modern navigator finds easiest to believe, because a ship going west around the Cape of Good Hope would indeed see the noon sun to the north.

APRIES AND AMASIS

Apries succeeded, and prospered for twenty-five years, and then sent an army against Cyrene that was nearly destroyed. The Egyptians revolted, thinking he had sent them to die so that he might rule the more securely. He sent **Amasis**, a man of the people he trusted, to talk them back. While Amasis was speaking, an Egyptian came behind him and put a helmet on his head, and hailed him king. He did not refuse. Apries sent Patarbemis to bring him, and when the man returned without him, and with a message too proud to bear, Apries cut off his nose and ears. The remaining Egyptians went over. Apries was defeated, taken, and later strangled, and buried among his fathers. Amasis ruled.

Amasis had been a private man who liked his drink and his joke, and in the morning, when he was short of money, he used to go about stealing. Those who said he had their property and whom the oracle condemned, he paid. Those whom the oracle cleared, he did not. When he was king he melted a gold foot-basin in which his guests had washed their feet, and made it into a divine image, and the Egyptians revered it. He told them they had washed their feet in it and worse. So it was with him. Once he was a man of the people. Now he was their king, and they should honour him. He also kept a terrifying schedule: the morning for business, the rest of the day for company, and when his friends said he should sit in state all day, he answered that a bow kept strung will break, and a man kept always serious will crack. He made a friendship with Polycrates of Samos, and with Cyrene, and married a woman of the place, and dedicated offerings in Greece, at Delphi and elsewhere, with his name on them. He is the king Cambyses will come to overthrow, and he will be dead when the Persian arrives, which will not save his body.

So Book Two ends where Book Three can begin: Egypt known, or as known as a travelling Greek can make it, and a new king in Persia who has inherited Cyrus's reach and none of Cyrus's willingness to stop.

EGYPTIANS HERODOTUS WANTS YOU TO REMEMBER

Name	What he is in the story	What to hold lightly
Psammetichus	The helmet, the interpreters, the children	The experiment
Neco	The canal, the African voyage	Herodotus doubts the sun, which may be the true part
Cheops	The great pyramid and forced labour	The story of his daughter
Amasis	The jester who became a capable king	The gossip from before the crown

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Herodotus does not believe the Phoenicians had the sun on their right, and that detail is now evidence they may have made the voyage. What does that do to the idea that a careful reporter is always the best judge of his own material?
2. Amasis turns a foot-basin into a god and tells the people to live with it. Is that a joke about religion, or a serious claim about office?
3. Book Two barely advances the war. Why might Herodotus think a history of the Persian Wars is unfinished without it?

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?

CHAPTER 17: DARIUS GOES NORTH, AND THE COUNTRY WILL NOT STAND

Darius wanted to punish the **Scythians**. They had once ruled upper Asia for twenty-eight years, Herodotus says, having come down when the Cimmerians fled before them, and the Medes had eventually driven them out. He also wanted the extension of his power. He bridged the Bosphorus, sailed to the Ister (the Danube), bridged that, and crossed into a country that refused to be a country in the Persian sense.

The Scythians held a council. Three peoples would fight with them. The rest said the war was not theirs, that the Persians had been provoked by Scythian raids long ago, and that they would fight only if the Persians struck first at them. The fighting Scythians did not offer a battle. They withdrew, filling the wells and destroying the pasture as they went, and sent a section of the army to beg help from the neighbours. Darius followed. The country went on ahead of him, emptier every day.

THE MESSAGE OF FOUR THINGS

He sent a herald at last, asking them either to stand and fight or to bring earth and water, the signs of submission. The Scythian kings answered that they had no cities and no planted land to defend, and so no reason to fight a pitched battle. They had graves. Let him find the graves of their fathers and disturb them, and he would see whether they fought. Until then they would continue as they were. And they sent him a gift: a bird, a mouse, a frog, and five arrows.

Darius read the gift as a surrender. The mouse lives in the earth, the frog in the water, the bird is like a horse, and the arrows were the Scythians giving up their arms. **Gobryas**, one of the seven, read it the other way. Unless you become birds and fly, or mice and go underground, or frogs and leap into the water, you will not get home, but die by these arrows. The Persians were already uneasy. The Scythian horsemen rode circles around foragers. The Ister bridge, guarded by Ionian Greeks on Darius's order, was the only way back.

The Scythians rode to the bridge and told the Ionians their count of days was up, and that they might break the bridge and go free, and thank the gods and the Scythians. The Ionians debated. Miltiades of the Chersonese, who will matter later at Marathon, wanted to break it and free Ionia. Histiaeus of Miletus said each of them ruled his city by Darius's favour, and that if Darius fell their own people would choose democracy and depose them. They decided to pretend. They broke the bridge a bowshot in from the Scythian bank, so that the Scythians would see a gap, and kept the rest, and promised to guard it while the Scythians went to find the Persians. Then they rebuilt it for Darius when he came.

Historian's Note: A campaign without a battle

Darius did operate on the Danube frontier. The details of the retreat, the gift, and the Ionian debate are Herodotus's construction, and they do a great deal of work. They show an empire that wins when there is a city to take, and stalls when the enemy will not own a field. They also plant Miltiades and Histiaeus, who will return when the war moves to the Aegean. The bird, the mouse, the frog, and the arrows are one of his perfect objects: a message that means what the reader already fears.

Darius came back by the bridge at night, afraid, and the Ionians were there. He crossed. He left Megabazus to subdue Thrace, and went home. Scythia was not a province. It had declined to become one.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The Scythians refuse battle because they have no cities to lose. What does a conventional empire not know how to fight?
2. Histiaeus saves Darius in order to save his own tyranny. Whose side is he on, in any sense that matters?
3. Gobryas and Darius read the same gift in opposite ways. Why is an ambiguous message such a useful thing to send an invader?

CHAPTER 18: CUSTOMS NORTH OF THE WIND

Having failed to conquer Scythia, Herodotus describes it, which is his usual revenge. The Scythians are nomads, without towns, living in wagons, expert at two things above all: keeping an invader from escaping, and preventing anyone from finding them. They sacrifice to Ares in a peculiar way, heaping up brushwood into a platform and setting an ancient iron sword on top as the image of the god, and pouring blood on it. They drink the blood of the first man they kill. They scalp, and hang the scalps from their bridles, and some sew them into cloaks. Once a year each district governor drinks wine mixed with the blood of enemies, and those who have no kill sit aside in disgrace. The skulls of their worst enemies they saw off below the brows and use as cups, gilded if the man was rich.

This is grim, and he means it to be. He also says they have a horror of adopting foreign customs, which he illustrates with two stories of men who did, and died for it. **Anacharsis**, who had travelled and seen Greek rites, was killed by his own brother for celebrating a festival of the Mother of the Gods in the woods. **Scyles**, a Scythian king with a Greek mother, used to leave his army outside the walls of the Greek city of the Borysthenites, change his clothes, and live as a Greek inside, and was killed by his brother when he was caught being initiated into Dionysus. Herodotus, who admires people who travel and ask questions, records a society that kills its travellers.

AMAZONS, BALD MEN, AND THE FALLING FEATHERS

The **Sauromatae**, he says, come from a party of Amazons who were captured by Greeks, killed their captors at sea, and landed on the Scythian shore. Scythian young men attached themselves to them. The women would not come and live behind wagons with the other Scythian wives. We shoot, we ride, we have not learned women's work, they said. If you want us as wives, go to your parents and collect your property, and let us live on our own. Their descendants, the Sauromatae, have women who hunt and fight, and a girl does not marry until she has killed an enemy.

Beyond, the reports thin. Bald men, who live on a tree-fruit and claim to be protected from the cold by their smoothness. A goat-footed people, whom he reports and does not vouch for. Men who sleep for six months of the year. East of these, the Issedones, who eat the dead flesh of a father mixed with the flesh of cattle, and gild the skull and offer it sacrifice. Beyond them, in what the Issedones say and he will not confirm, one-eyed men, the Arimaspians, who steal gold from griffins. He has a better explanation for a wonder closer in. The Scythians say the air is full of feathers, which fill the northern country and cannot be travelled. He thinks the feathers are snow.

Historian's Note: Ethnography and exhibition

Some of this is real nomad practice, distorted by hostile reporters: wagon-life, scalp-taking as a known steppe custom in later centuries, a martial place for some women among Sarmatian peoples that archaeology has not dismissed. Some of it is the edge of the map doing what edges do. He is better when he interprets (snow for feathers) than when he accumulates. The killing of Anacharsis is a story about the cost of becoming the kind of man Herodotus is.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Herodotus admires inquiry, and shows you a people who execute men for foreign rites. Can a traveller describe that fairly, or does the description already take a side?
2. The Amazons refuse the wagon of ordinary wives. What bargain do they offer, and what do they refuse to give up?
3. He decides the feathers are snow. Apply that move to one other marvel in this chapter. What might it be, if it is not what it is called?

CHAPTER 19: LIBYA, SILPHIUM, AND THE FOUNDING OF CYRENE

The second half of this stretch of the inquiry goes south and west, into **Libya**, which for Herodotus means Africa as far as anyone claimed to know it. The occasion is a Persian expedition sent by Aryandes, governor of Egypt, against Barca, which pulls the narrative across to Cyrene and the Greek cities planted in the sand.

Cyrene was founded from Thera, and Thera from Sparta, and the story of the founding is an oracle that will not let go. The Theraeans were told to found a city in Libya. They did not know where Libya was, and did nothing. Seven years of no rain later, they asked again, and the priestess said the unplanted city was the cause. They sent to Crete, found a murex fisherman named Corobius who had been driven onto an island called Platea off the Libyan coast, and hired him as guide. A small party left him there with provisions and sailed home to report. The provisions ran out. A Samian ship bound for Egypt, driven off course, fed him for a year. The Theraeans eventually settled Platea, failed to thrive, and were told by the oracle they had not settled Libya itself, only an island. They moved to the mainland, to Aziris, and in the sixth year the Libyans led them west, passing by the fairest place in the dark, which was Cyrene, so that Greeks would not occupy it, and brought them to a spring called the Fountain of Apollo. There the city stood.

BATTUS AND THE PLANT THAT WAS WORTH A WAR

The founder was **Battus**, a stammerer, whose name the oracle at Delphi had used before he understood it as a title. Under his house Cyrene grew, and under one of his successors, Battus the Fortunate, it grew fast, because an oracle invited all Greeks to share the land, and a great number came. The Libyans, losing ground, asked the king of Egypt for help. Apries sent the army that was destroyed, the disaster that began his fall. Later Arcesilaus of Cyrene quarrelled with his brothers, left, gathered an army in Samos by promising land, came back, and burned his enemies in a tower. He was assassinated in Barca. His mother Pheretime asked the Persian governor in Egypt for vengeance, and got an army. Barca was taken by a trick after a siege: a Persian general swore the army would stay only so long as the earth beneath them stayed, having undermined his oath by standing over a hidden trench. The leading men were impaled. Pheretime's own end, Herodotus notes with a grim satisfaction, was to die eaten by worms, so that people could see how far the jealousy of the gods reaches when a human vengeance goes too far.

The wealth of the region, in his account, is **silphium**, a plant the Cyrenaeans harvested under regulation and that has no certain modern survivor. He is interested in the coast, the three harvests (coast, hill, and desert edge) and in the peoples inward: the nomads who cauterise the veins on children's heads, the tribe where the women wear leather anklets to mark their lovers, the Nasamonians who swear on the graves of the justest men, and who once sent five young men across the desert, southwest, until they came to a great river running east with crocodiles in it, and black city-dwellers who did not know their language. He thinks the river was the upper Nile. He may have been right that a river was there. He was guessing the connection.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The Theraeans ignore an oracle until a drought makes it expensive. What does a foundation story gain by making the settlers reluctant?
2. Pheretime gets her revenge and dies of worms. Is Herodotus reporting a medical fact, delivering a moral, or doing both without admitting it?
3. Five young men cross the sand and find a river with crocodiles. What can you responsibly conclude, and what can you not?

CHAPTER 20: WHAT HE WILL NOT DRAW

Herodotus stops the Libyan tour to say something about method, and it is one of the passages that makes later historians claim him and disown him in the same breath. He will not describe the Eridanus, the river said to flow into the northern sea, from which amber comes. The name is Greek, not foreign, and no one who claims to have seen the river has convinced him. He does not believe in a race of one-eyed men, or in goat-footed men, in any stronger sense than that he has recorded the claim. Tin and amber do come from the ends of Europe. He will not say how.

He has a principle, and he states it. For his own part, he is obliged to report what is said, but he is not at all obliged to believe it. Let that sentence stand over the ants, the griffins, the cinnamon birds, and the dolphin. It is the contract. He is a collector of accounts. Belief is a second act, and he does not always perform it, and he does not always tell you when he has.

AGAINST THE CIRCLE

He returns to the map. He laughs at the many who have drawn the world round, as if turned on a lathe, with Ocean running around it, and Asia made the same size as Europe. He will show, in a few sentences, how large each is, and what the boundaries actually are, so far as anyone knows them. Libya is washed by the sea except where it joins Asia. Europe no one has discovered whether it is washed to the east and north. It is longer than the other two put together. He refuses a symmetry he cannot see.

On the Nile he has one more inquiry. He sailed as far as Elephantine himself, and beyond that he has hearsay: a great lake, and beyond it Ethiopian nomads, and a river, and a city of deserters from Egypt twelve days' march from Meroe. He thinks the Nile's course, and the Danube's, may be in some sense counterparts, one draining the south and one the north, and he is constructing a balance he has just mocked in other men. The impulse to make the world rhyme is hard to kill, even in the man who mocks it.

Historian's Note: The sentence to keep

'I am obliged to report what is said, but I am not obliged to believe it.' Later enemies called him the father of lies. He had already built the answer into the book. The fairer charge is that he does not always show his work, and that a marvellous story, once told at length, convinces even when he has waved at disbelief. Use the sentence on him as well as with him.

Book Four ends with the edges unfinished on purpose. Scythia has not been taken. Libya has been crossed by five young men and a rumour. The map has been refused its circle. Darius is home, and the Greek cities of Asia are still his, held by tyrants who kept his bridge. The next fire starts in one of those cities, and the man who lights it has already appeared, arguing at the Danube that a tyrant should save a king.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. If a historian must report what is said and need not believe it, what does he owe the reader beyond the story?
2. Herodotus mocks symmetrical maps and then pairs the Nile with the Danube. Where do you catch him wanting the world to be neat?
3. Why leave the north and the south unfinished, instead of inventing an end for them?

CHAPTER 21: ATHENS, SPARTA, AND THE ROAD TO THE FIRE

Before a coast can revolt, Herodotus wants you to know the two cities that will be asked for help, because the war that is coming is not only a Persian war. It is a Greek argument about what a city is.

Athens had been under the **Peisistratids**, a tyranny that began with Peisistratus and a piece of theatre (a tall woman dressed as Athena, riding in a chariot into the city ahead of him) and that lasted, with interruptions, until his sons. **Hipparchus** was killed by **Harmodius** and **Aristogeiton**, lovers, after Hipparchus had insulted Harmodius's sister by refusing her as a basket-bearer at the Panathenaea and then calling her unchaste. They meant to kill Hippias, the ruling brother, as well. They killed Hipparchus. Hippias lived, and the tyranny hardened. Herodotus is careful here, more careful than the Athenian drinking-songs. The tyrant-slayers did not end the tyranny. Sparta did, four years later, when the Alcmaeonids, an exiled Athenian family, rebuilt the temple at Delphi more beautifully than the contract required, and the oracle took to telling every Spartan who asked about anything that Athens must first be freed.

Freed, Athens quarrelled with itself, and then with Sparta, and then grew. **Cleisthenes** reorganised the tribes so that old local factions could not simply own them, and gave the people the constitution Herodotus credits with their later nerve. When the Spartans tried to put Isagoras and a narrow oligarchy back in, the people besieged them on the Acropolis and let them out under a truce, and killed the party that had invited them. Herodotus's judgement is blunt. Athens, held down, had been no better in war than her neighbours. Freed, she became the first of them. It is a political claim as much as a military one, and he knows it.

SPARTA, AND A KING WHO WAS NOT QUITE BELIEVED

Sparta he describes by its kings, its double kingship, and its habit of sending armies under men who could be prosecuted at home for what they did abroad. **Cleomenes** is the king who will not leave the next chapters alone: capable, suspect, eventually mad in the Spartan account, which Herodotus reports with the usual stack of explanations, including one that he had picked up the Scythian habit of drinking unmixed wine. Cleomenes interferes in Athens, fails, interferes in Aegina, quarrels with his fellow king Demaratus, and has Demaratus deposed on a question of birth. Demaratus goes to Persia. He will stand beside Xerxes later, telling him truths the court does not want.

Historian's Note: Freedom and the fleet

Herodotus's praise of Athenian freedom is real, and it is not simple. The same city is about to abandon the Ionians, sacrifice nothing it can avoid, and then, at Marathon and Salamis, do the thing he thinks saved Greece. He is not writing a hymn. He is watching a constitution under pressure, and he thinks the pressure reveals it.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The Athenian songs say Harmodius and Aristogeiton freed the city. Herodotus says they did not. Why does a city prefer the song?
2. Cleisthenes changes the tribes, and Herodotus links the change to courage in war. Do you find that link convincing, or too neat?
3. Demaratus is thrown out of Sparta and will tell the truth in Persia. What does exile do to a witness?

CHAPTER 22: ARISTAGORAS AND THE BRONZE MAP

The revolt begins in a failure. Exiles from Naxos asked **Aristagoras**, deputy tyrant of Miletus, to put them back. He asked Artaphernes, the Persian governor at Sardis and brother of Darius, for ships. Artaphernes asked Darius, and Darius agreed, and sent Megabates with two hundred ships. On the way Megabates and Aristagoras quarrelled. A watch had not been set on a ship, and Megabates punished the captain, a guest-friend of Aristagoras. Aristagoras released him. Megabates, Herodotus was told, warned the Naxians. The siege failed after four months. Aristagoras had promised Artaphernes the costs. He could not pay. He had also had a message from **Histiaeus**, the real tyrant of Miletus, kept by Darius at Susa as a friend who was not allowed to leave, telling him to revolt. The message was tattooed on a slave's shaved head, and the hair had been left to grow back over it.

Aristagoras gave up the tyranny in words, established equality of government in Miletus, and did the same, or pretended to, in the other Ionian cities, handing over tyrants who had been arrested off the fleet. He needed a stronger ally than a phrase. He went to Sparta.

CLEOMENES LOOKS AT THE MAP

He brought a bronze tablet on which the circuit of the whole earth was engraved, and every sea and every river. He told Cleomenes the Ionians were slaves, and that a successful revolt would bring gold, silver, bronze, embroidered clothes, beasts of burden, and slaves, all to be had in Asia, and that the Persians were easy to beat, fighting in trousers, with turbans on their heads. Cleomenes asked how many days' march it was from the sea to the king. Aristagoras, who had been clever until that moment, told the truth. Three months. Cleomenes cut him off and told him to leave Sparta before sunset. The map had been a mistake. It showed the distance.

Aristagoras followed him home with a suppliant's branch, and found him with his daughter **Gorgo**, a child of eight or nine. He asked Cleomenes to send the child away, and offered ten talents, then fifty, to reopen the alliance. The child said: Father, the stranger will corrupt you, unless you get up and go. Cleomenes was pleased, and went into another room, and Aristagoras left Sparta.

He went to Athens, where he did not have to outbid a child. He told the same story, and added that Miletus was an Athenian colony, and that Athens, at the height of her power, ought to help. He promised everything, and asked for nothing in particular he could not sound as if he were giving. Herodotus's line is dry. It seems easier to deceive a crowd than one man. Cleomenes had been one man. The Athenian assembly voted twenty ships to help the Ionians, and appointed Melanthius to command them. Those ships, he says, were the beginning of troubles for Greeks and non-Greeks alike.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Aristagoras tells the truth about the three months, and it ruins him in Sparta. When is honesty the wrong tactic, and when is it the only one that should count?
2. Gorgo, a child, stops the bribe. Why does Herodotus give the decisive sentence to her?

3. He says a crowd is easier to deceive than one man. Is that the lesson of Athens and Sparta here, or his own preference showing?

CHAPTER 23: THE BURNING OF SARDIS

The Athenians arrived with twenty ships, and the Eretrians with five, paying a debt to Miletus from an old war. The whole force marched inland, with the Ionians, and took **Sardis** except the citadel, which Artaphernes held. They did not loot it so much as lose it. A soldier set a house on fire. The houses of Sardis were reed-roofed, and the fire ran, and the city burned, including the temple of Cybele, the local goddess. The Persians and Lydians in the market, with the river at their backs, held. The Greeks, seeing more troops coming, withdrew to the ridge of Tmolus and then, by night, to their ships.

They did not all get there. Persian forces caught them at Ephesus and beat them hard. The Athenians after that refused every message Aristagoras sent, and went home. They had been present for the fire. They would not be present for the war the fire made. Darius, when he heard, asked who the Athenians were. Told, he called for his bow, shot an arrow into the sky, and prayed that he might be allowed to punish them. He told a servant to say to him three times, whenever dinner was set: Master, remember the Athenians.

A REVOLT THAT SPREADS, AND A MAN WHO WILL NOT STAY

The burning of the temple gave the Persian cause a holiness it used. The revolt itself spread: to Byzantium, to Caria, to Caunus, to Cyprus, where Onesilus persuaded his brother the king of Salamis to join, except the city of Amathus, which he besieged. The Persians crossed to Cyprus. Onesilus was killed. Cyprus was recovered. In Ionia the war went on without a centre. Aristagoras, watching it fail, took counsel. A man called to speak said what others thought: leave. Aristagoras settled the people who would follow him at Myrcinus in Thrace, the place Darius had once given Histiaeus, and died there in a fight with Thracians, city and all.

Histiaeus, at Susa, persuaded Darius that he could stop the revolt if he were sent down to the coast. Darius let him go. Artaphernes, who lived in the same world as the tattooed head, was less impressed. Histiaeus arrived in Sardis and was told, by the governor, that he had stitched the shoe and Aristagoras had put it on. He fled to Chios. The Chians did not believe his story of having raised the revolt for their sake. He tried Samos, and piracy, and a return to Miletus, and was refused by the Milesians, who had had enough of tyrants. He ended, later, caught on a raid on the mainland, and Artaphernes and Harpagus impaled him and sent his head to Darius. Darius blamed them for not bringing the man alive, and had the head washed and buried, as a man who had once done him a service at the bridge.

Historian's Note: Who burned the temple

The fire in the temple of Cybele is the sort of accident that campaigns are later said to have intended. Herodotus presents it as a soldier's act in a reed city, not a policy. Darius's dinner reminder is theatre, and it tells you how the war will be personalised: not Ionia, but Athens. That narrowing decides the next twenty years.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Athens sends twenty ships and then withdraws. Does the withdrawal cancel the responsibility for the fire, or fix it?
2. Darius has a servant remind him of the Athenians at dinner. What does a king lose by turning a province's revolt into a private insult?
3. Histiaeus serves Darius, uses Darius, and is killed by Darius's servants, who are then scolded. Whose man was he?

CHAPTER 24: LADE, MILETUS, AND THE PLAY THAT WAS FINED

The Persians gathered a fleet from Phoenicia, Cyprus, Cilicia, and Egypt, and came for Miletus by land and sea. The Ionians decided not to defend the walls with their own men. They would fight at sea, off the island of **Lade**, and leave the Milesians to hold the city. They assembled three hundred and fifty-three ships. Dionysius of Phocaea took command in practice if not in title, and drilled them hard, rowing through one another, arming the marines, and keeping them at it through the day. For seven days they bore it. Then they said they would rather be slaves than endure this, and refused to train. Dionysius told them they was on the razor's edge between freedom and the thing they feared. They would not listen.

The Persian commanders had a second plan. They sent the deposed Ionian tyrants, who were with the fleet, to appeal each to his own city: come over, and you will not be burned, and you will not be sold, and no worse will be required of you than before. Refuse, and you will be enslaved, and your sons will be made eunuchs, and your daughters carried off. Most of the contingents held. The Samians, except eleven ships whose captains would not obey the order, sailed away when the battle started. The Lesbians saw them go and went. The line broke. The Chians fought until they could not, then made for home, and many of them were killed later by the Ephesians, who took them for raiders. Dionysius of Phocaea, seeing the battle lost, took three enemy ships and sailed, not home, but to Phoenicia, and from there to Sicily, to live as a pirate against Carthaginians and Etruscans, and not against Greeks.

THE FALL, AND A POET'S FINE

Miletus was taken by mining the walls, in the sixth year from Aristagoras's revolt. The temple at Didyma, with its oracle, was plundered and burned. The people were enslaved. Darius settled some of them at Ampe on the Red Sea, near the mouth of the Tigris. The Milesians who had escaped did not go back. The city that had been the glory of Ionia was empty of itself.

Athens took the news harder than her twenty ships had earned, or exactly as hard. When Phrynichus produced a play, *The Fall of Miletus*, the theatre wept, and the city fined him a thousand drachmas for reminding them of a calamity that was their own, and forbade the play to be staged again. Herodotus records the fine without raising his voice. It is one of his best sentences about a democracy. Grief was allowed. Being made to look at it was not.

The Persians spent the next year taking the islands and the remaining cities. They netted some islands with a line of men, and castrated the boys they found most beautiful, and sent the girls to the king. The cities were then handed back, in a colder peace, to a system of treaties, and the tyrannies were not all restored. Artaphernes measured the land and fixed the tribute at about what it had been, and the measurement stood. The revolt was over. It had burned a temple, emptied Miletus, and taught Darius the name of a city he now said aloud at dinner. The next fleet would not be coming for Ionia. It would be coming for Athens and Eretria, the two cities that had sent the ships.

THE REVOLT IN FOUR MISTAKES

Mistake	Who	What followed
A siege of Naxos he could not pay for	Aristagoras	A revolt as an exit
Showing Sparta the distance	Aristagoras	No Spartan army
A fire in a reed-roofed city	A soldier at Sardis	A holy war, and a king's reminder
Seven days of drill, then a refusal	The fleet at Lade	The loss of Miletus

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The Ionians would rather be slaves than train. Is that cowardice, or a judgement on Dionysius, or both?
2. Athens fines a poet for making the city weep at its own part in a disaster. What is a democracy protecting when it does that?
3. The Persians net an island and then settle a measured tribute. Which act tells you more about how the empire intends to last?

CHAPTER 25: REMEMBER THE ATHENIANS

Darius tested the ground. He sent **Mardonius** along the coast of Thrace with a fleet and an army, to punish Athens and Eretria and to take as many Greek cities as he could. The fleet was wrecked off Athos, three hundred ships and more than twenty thousand men in Herodotus's figures, and a Thracian tribe caught the army by night and wounded Mardonius. They came home without a battle. Darius then sent heralds to Greece demanding earth and water. Many mainland cities and all the islanders gave it. Athens and Sparta did not. The Athenians threw the heralds into the pit where condemned men went. The Spartans threw theirs into a well, and told them to take earth and water from there to the king.

He spent three years gathering the next force, and a revolt in Egypt delayed it, and he died. The command passed to Datis and Artaphernes, and the order was narrow: enslave Athens and Eretria, and bring the slaves into his sight. They sailed straight across the Aegean, taking islands as they came. At Eretria the city was betrayed by two leading men after a six-day defence, and the temples were burned, in payment for Sardis, and the people were carried off.

THE PLAIN

Hippias, the old tyrant, guided them in to **Marathon**, a plain fit for cavalry, near the city. The Athenians marched out and camped in a sanctuary of Heracles. The Plataeans came, all of them, and no one else. A runner, **Pheidippides**, had gone to Sparta and arrived the day after he left Athens, and the Spartans said they would come, but not before the full moon. Their law held them. He also, on the way, met the god Pan, who asked why the Athenians paid him no attention, friendly as he was. They believed the runner afterward, and founded a cult.

In the Athenian camp the generals were divided. **Miltiades** wanted to fight. Others wanted to wait for Sparta. The polemarch Callimachus had the casting vote. Miltiades told him that if they did not fight, the city would go over to the Mede, and that if they fought before a crack showed, they could win, provided the gods were even-handed. Callimachus voted to fight. The command came round, by the daily rotation, to Miltiades. He waited until his own day.

They charged at a run, a mile in Herodotus's reckoning, the first Greeks he knows of to charge at a run, and the first to face the Median dress without terror. The centre was thin, and the Persian and Saka centre broke it. The wings won, and then closed on the centre, and the fight became a pursuit to the ships. Callimachus was killed, and Cynegirus, a brother of the poet Aeschylus, had his hand cut off by an axe as he held a stern. Seven ships were taken. The rest got away. The Athenians marched back to the city at speed, because the fleet was rounding the cape towards Phalerum, and were there before it. The Persians lay off the beach, and then sailed home. They had Eretria. They did not have Athens.

The dead were counted: six thousand four hundred on the Persian side, by the Athenian claim, and one hundred and ninety-two Athenians. The Spartans arrived after the full moon, too late for the battle, looked at the bodies, praised the work, and went home. The one hundred and ninety-two were buried on the plain. The mound is still the point of the story.

Historian's Note: The run

The charge at Marathon is in Herodotus. The later story, that a runner dropped dead after carrying the news to Athens, is not. Pheidippides ran to Sparta. The modern marathon distance is a modern invention laid over a real battle. The numbers of Persian dead are Athenian numbers. The decision, the delay for the moon, the Plataeans, and the race back to the city are the parts to trust first.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Athens and Sparta answer a demand for earth and water by killing the messengers. Does the outrage of the demand justify the answer?
2. Miltiades waits for his own day of command. Is that strategy, pride, or the constitution working as intended?
3. No Spartan fights at Marathon, and Sparta praises the dead. What kind of ally is that?

CHAPTER 26: XERXES AND THE DREAMS

Darius died as he prepared to march himself, on Egypt and on Athens both. His son **Xerxes** (ZURK-seez) took Egypt first, and then turned, at a council, to Greece. Mardonius, hungry to be governor of a new province, urged the war. Greece was a beautiful country, too good for anyone but the king, and Athens must be punished. Onomacritus, an oracle-collector, recited the prophecies that favoured an invasion and left out the ones that did not. Xerxes was for the war. Then he slept, and was against it, and called the council back, and said he had been wrong. Egypt was enough. To fight Greeks who had done nothing new was to add the restless to the restless.

That night a dream came, a tall and beautiful man, telling him he had no choice. He ignored it. The dream came again, and threatened him. He did what a man does when he wants a dream to be an accident: he sent **Artabanus**, his uncle, who had spoken against the war, to sleep in the royal bed in the royal clothes. The dream came to Artabanus, and was about to burn his eyes out with hot irons for trying to turn aside what must happen. Artabanus woke convinced. The expedition was decided by a vision neither man had wanted to obey.

Historian's Note: A war decided twice

Herodotus gives Xerxes a real argument against his own invasion, and then a supernatural compulsion. You can read the dream as the court telling itself the decision was not a choice. You can read it as Herodotus's belief that great disasters have more than human authors. Either way, he does not let the king be only a villain. He lets him hesitate, which makes the size of the march heavier.

Demaratus, the exiled Spartan king, was already in Susa. He will tell Xerxes, later, that the Spartans fear the law more than his subjects fear him, and will fight however few they are. Xerxes laughs. The laugh is the expedition's other founding moment. A king who has been frightened by a dream cannot hear a smaller fact about discipline.

He spent four years gathering the force, and provisioning the road, and digging. At the Hellespont the first bridges were broken by a storm. He ordered the sea whipped, and a pair of fetters thrown in, and the overseers of the work beheaded. Herodotus reports the whipping and lets you decide how much of it is rage and how much is a message to the army. New bridges were built, warships and triremes as pontoons, cables of flax and papyrus, brushwood, earth, a palisade so the animals would not see the water. At Mount Athos, where Mardonius's fleet had died, he cut a canal through the neck of the peninsula, wide enough for two triremes to pass, because he would not be refused by the same rock. Herodotus thinks the canal was vanity. The ships could have been hauled across. Xerxes wanted the earth to show he had been there.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Xerxes changes his mind, and a dream changes it back. Who, in this scene, actually decides?
2. Artabanus has to wear the king's clothes before the dream will speak to him. What does the story think kingship is?

3. The canal at Athos is called vanity. Is there a kind of power that has to leave a mark even when a cheaper road would do?

CHAPTER 27: THE REVIEW, THE BRIDGES, AND A FATHER'S REQUEST

Xerxes moved from Sardis in the spring. A Lydian named **Pythius**, who had feasted the whole army and offered to contribute his fortune, asked one favour as the column was leaving. He had five sons with the expedition. Let the eldest stay behind to manage the estate. Xerxes answered at length about his own generosity, and then had the son cut in half, and the two halves set on either side of the road, and the army marched out between them. Herodotus does not decorate it. The request was modest. The answer was a demonstration.

At the Hellespont Xerxes reviewed the force from a white stone throne, and wept, and told Artabanus he wept because in a hundred years not one of the men he saw would be alive. Artabanus, who had opposed the war, said life was sadder than that: misfortunes and diseases make a man wish for death even in a short life, and the god, in his jealousy, frightens what is great. Xerxes let him go home. The bridges held. The crossing took seven days and seven nights, under the lash, the baggage animals and the servants over one bridge, the soldiers over the other. A man of the Hellespont, watching, asked Zeus why he had taken the shape of a Persian and the name of Xerxes to empty the world of men, when he could have destroyed Greece without all this.

THE CATALOGUE

At Doriscus in Thrace the army was counted. Herodotus gives the method: ten thousand packed into a pen, a line drawn, the pen filled again and again. He reaches one million seven hundred thousand infantry, eighty thousand cavalry, and then the naval nations, and then the forces picked up in Europe, and a total that later writers have not believed. He lists the dress of each contingent: Persians in trousers and tiaras, with wicker shields; Medes in the same, because it was their fashion first; Assyrians with bronze helmets and clubs knotted with iron; Indians in cotton; Caspians in goatskin; Ethiopians in lion and leopard skins, their spears tipped with gazelle horn; and on through a roll-call of the empire. The fleet he puts at twelve hundred and seven warships. **Artemisia**, ruler of Halicarnassus, his own city, commands five, and he admires her above the men beside her.

Historian's Note: The numbers

The review at Doriscus is a set piece, and the totals are too large for the roads, the water, and the ships. Later Greek writers already scaled them down. What survives the scaling is the political fact: a composite empire, many languages, one command, and a Greek from Halicarnassus who can name the dress of contingents his city would have seen pass. Read the catalogue as a map of the empire, not as a census.

As the army drank rivers dry (he says the Melas failed, and the Lisus), the Greeks who had decided to resist met, made up a quarrel between Athens and Aegina, and sent spies, who were caught, about to be executed, and released by Xerxes so that they could go home and report the size of what was coming. He wanted the fear to arrive first.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Xerxes weeps for the shortness of life and then marches an army between the halves of a man's son. How do the two scenes belong in the same chapter?
2. Why send captured spies home alive?
3. Artemisia commands ships for the invader, and the historian of Halicarnassus admires her. What does that do to a simple story of Greeks against foreigners?

CHAPTER 28: THE PASS, THE THREE HUNDRED, AND THE LAW

The Greeks decided to hold **Thermopylae** (*ther-MOP-ih-lee*), the Hot Gates, where the mountains come down to the sea and the road is narrow, and to hold Artemisium at sea so that the army would not be turned. **Leonidas** came with the advance guard: three hundred Spartans, all of them men who had living sons, and contingents from the Peloponnese, and from Thespieae and Thebes, and the local peoples. The total was a few thousand, not an army that could meet Xerxes in a plain. It was an army that could meet him in a gate.

Xerxes waited four days, expecting them to leave. A horseman sent to look reported that the Spartans were combing their hair. Demaratus told him what the hair meant. These men have come to fight for the pass, and they are adorning themselves for the danger. It is their custom, when they are going to risk their lives, to dress their heads. Xerxes did not believe it. On the fifth day he sent the Medes in, with orders to take the Greeks and bring them into his sight. The Medes fell. He sent the Immortals, the ten thousand, under Hydarnes. They did no better. The Greeks had longer spears, and a wall, and a ground they had chosen, and they pretended flight and turned, more than once, and the Persians died in the turn.

THE PATH

A man of the country, **Ephialtes**, son of Eurydemus, wanting a reward, told Xerxes of the path over the mountain, the Anopaea, by which the position could be turned. Leonidas had posted the Phocians on it. They heard the leaves under Persian feet at dawn, and withdrew to a higher crest, thinking they were the target. The Persians ignored them and came down.

Leonidas sent most of the allies away. He stayed, with the Spartans, the Thespians who refused to leave, and the Thebans whom he kept, Herodotus says, as hostages. He had an oracle that Sparta must lose a king or a city. He may also have judged that a withdrawal would look like flight, and that the men who stayed could cover the rest. At mid-morning they came out from the wall and fought in the wider part of the pass, with nothing left to save but the killing. Leonidas fell. The Spartans recovered his body. Xerxes' brothers fell. When the troops from the path arrived, the Greeks drew back to the hillock at the entrance, all except the Thebans, who went over. They fought with daggers when the spears were gone, and with hands and teeth, and the Persians buried them with missiles, coming on over their own dead.

Xerxes had Leonidas's head cut off and fixed on a stake. Herodotus thinks this a breach of Persian custom, which honours brave enemies, and a sign of how angry the pass had made him. Later the Greeks set inscriptions. One, for the Spartans, he quotes, and it is the sentence the place kept: Stranger, go tell the Spartans that here we lie, obedient to their words.

The fleet at Artemisium had held, just, in three days of weather and fighting, and when the news of the pass arrived it withdrew. The road into central Greece was open. Athens was next.

WHO STAYED

Contingent	What Herodotus says	What the staying cost
Spartans	Three hundred, chosen for having sons	The pass, and a king
Thespians	Refused the order to leave	The city later burned, the men dead here
Thebans	Kept by Leonidas, then surrendered	A disputed reputation
Phocians	Set on the path, and bypassed	The failure that opened the hill

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Demaratus says the Spartans fear the law more than Xerxes' subjects fear him. What kind of fear is he praising?
2. Leonidas sends the allies away and stays. Is that sacrifice, strategy, or a king's reading of an oracle?
3. The epitaph does not mention the Persians. What does it think the dead were obeying, and why might that be the point?

CHAPTER 29: WOODEN WALLS

The oracle at Delphi told the Athenians to fly to the ends of the earth, and then, when they came as suppliants with olive branches, gave them a second answer: a wooden wall would not fall, and divine Salamis would destroy the sons of women, at the sowing or the gathering of the grain. Professional interpreters said the wooden wall was the thorn-hedge of the Acropolis, and that Salamis would be the death of Athenians, because otherwise the god would have said cruel Salamis, not divine. **Themistocles** (*theh-MIS-toh-kleez*), who had already spent a windfall of silver from the mines at Laurium on a fleet of two hundred ships, read it the other way. The wooden wall was the ships. Salamis would destroy the enemy. His reading won. The city was evacuated. The Acropolis was left to the treasurers and the poor who believed the hedge. Xerxes took it, burned the temples, and sent the news to Susa. The hedge had not been the wall.

THE MESSAGE THAT STARTED THE BATTLE

The allied fleet lay at Salamis, quarrelling. The Peloponnesians wanted to fall back to the Isthmus, where a wall was being built. Themistocles wanted to fight in the narrows, where numbers counted for less and the Persian squadrons would foul one another. He was losing the argument. He sent a servant, Sicinnus, tutor of his sons, to the Persian camp with a message: Themistocles, who favours the king, tells you the Greeks are afraid and planning to slip away. Strike now, and you will take them. Cut off their retreat.

Xerxes believed him, because it was what he wanted, and because a Greek traitor was a familiar object. The Egyptian squadron was sent to close the western channel. The Persians moved by night. **Aristides**, an Athenian exile and Themistocles' enemy, crossed from Aegina in the dark, called Themistocles out, and told him the fleet was surrounded. Let us contend from now on, he said, over which of us can do the city more good. The generals still doubted, until a Tenian ship deserted from the Persians and confirmed it. They had to fight.

Xerxes watched from a hill, with a secretary beside him to write down what each captain did. The Greeks backed water at first, and then an Athenian ship rammed, and the line closed. In the narrows the Persian numbers broke their own order. Ships in the rear pressed forward to be seen by the king and drove the ships in front onto Greek rams. **Artemisia**, pursued by an Athenian, rammed a friendly ship, a Calyndian, and sank it. The Athenian captain assumed she was a deserter or a Greek and turned away. Xerxes, watching, assumed she had sunk an enemy, and said his men had become women and his women men. Herodotus, from her city, tells it without rescuing anyone's dignity.

The king lost the day, and did not know yet how completely. He was afraid the Greeks would sail to the Hellespont and break the bridges. Themistocles, for once advising against his own previous cunning, told the council not to pursue that plan. Better the king should leave. If he were trapped he would fight like a starving man, and the fleet could not destroy the army. Sicinnus was sent again, this time to say Themistocles had restrained the Greeks from breaking the bridges, out of friendship. Xerxes began the retreat. Mardonius, who still wanted a province, asked to be left with picked troops. He was.

Historian's Note: Salamis

The battle was fought in 480 BCE, in the strait between the island and the mainland. Themistocles' two messages are in Herodotus, and they are the kind of story Athenians told about their cleverest man. The topography supports the core: a large fleet disadvantaged in narrow water, a king watching, a retreat that followed. Artemisia's ram is the anecdote he cannot resist, from the city he came from.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Themistocles wins the battle with a lie to the enemy and then lies to the enemy again to end it. Is there a point at which the cleverness becomes the danger?
2. Xerxes watches so that captains will fight to be recorded. How does being watched change a battle?
3. The wooden wall is a phrase that can mean a hedge or a fleet. Why do oracles, in this book, so often become arguments rather than answers?

CHAPTER 30: PLATAEA, MYCALE, AND THE SOFT COUNTRIES

Mardonius wintered in Thessaly, and in the spring came south. Athens, evacuated again, was offered a separate peace: her land back, her temples rebuilt, a place as Persia's equal ally. A Macedonian king brought the offer. The Athenian council waited until the Spartan envoys were in the room, and then refused, calling on the common language, the common shrines, and the shared way of sacrifice, which it was not theirs to betray. They asked Sparta, more practically, for an army in Attica. Sparta was busy walling the Isthmus. Sparta marched, at last, after the wall was far along and after Chileus of Tegea warned them that walls do not stop men who have ships.

The armies met near **Plataea**. Herodotus gives the argument over who would hold the left wing, the omens that would not favour an attack, the Persian cavalry choking a spring, and eleven days of waiting. Then Mardonius, tired of his own Greek allies and of the delay, forced a battle. **Pausanias**, the Spartan regent, manoeuvred badly and bravely. The Athenians ended opposite the Thebans, who fought hard for the Persian side. The Spartans and Tegeans took the brunt of the Immortals. Mardonius was killed where the fight was thickest, on a white horse, with a thousand picked men around him. The Persian line broke. The camp was stormed. The vengeance for Thermopylae, as the Greeks understood it, was taken in an afternoon.

On the same day, Herodotus believes, the fleet landed the men who burned the Persian ships at **Mycale** in Ionia, and a rumour of Plataea ran through them before any messenger could have arrived. He likes the coincidence, and he lets it stand. Ionia revolted again, this time with a fleet behind the revolt. In the next year the Athenians and their allies besieged Sestos, on the Hellespont, and took it, and carried the cables of Xerxes' bridges home as trophies. Herodotus ends the war there, not because nothing happened afterward, but because the invasion had failed.

THE LAST ADVICE

He closes on a story from the beginning, as if the book had been a circle he was always going to complete. Artembares, a Persian, proposed to Cyrus that they leave their rough country and take a better one. Cyrus said they might, and that they should prepare to be subjects instead of rulers. Soft countries breed soft men. The same land does not grow a fine harvest and men good for war. The Persians chose the rough ground and the rule. Herodotus approves the choice, and leaves you with it: an empire that has just failed to add Greece to itself, warned by its founder that the wanting was the danger.

Historian's Note: Where the book stops

The Histories end in 479 BCE, with Sestos, not with the later Athenian empire that grew out of the alliance against Persia. He knows that story. He does not tell it. The last anecdote about soft countries is aimed backward at Cyrus and forward at anyone who thinks the winning side has escaped the rule. Plataea and Mycale are dated to 479. The same-day tradition is his, and you may treat it as meaning rather than as a timetable.

THE INVASION, REDUCED TO ITS GATES

Place	Year	What held or failed
Marathon	490	A citizen levy, a plain, no Spartans yet
Thermopylae	480	A pass, until a path
Salamis	480	Narrow water, and a lie that forced the fight
Plataea and Mycale	479	A land defeat, a shore burned, the bridges' cables taken

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Athens refuses a favourable peace in front of the Spartan envoys. How much of the refusal is principle, and how much is audience?
2. Herodotus ends with Cyrus warning that soft countries breed soft men. After nine books of marvels and wealth, do you accept the moral?
3. He stops before Athens becomes an empire in her turn. What would the next chapter have had to admit?

CHAPTER 31: PRONUNCIATION AND WHO IS WHO

Names in this book travelled from Persian and Egyptian into Greek, and from Greek into a Latin-shaped English. The guide below is for reading aloud, not for reconstructing the ancient sound. Stress the syllable in capitals.

NAMES YOU WILL MEET MORE THAN ONCE

Name	Say it	Who they are
Herodotus	heh-ROD-oh-tus	The inquirer, from Halicarnassus
Croesus	KREE-sus	Last Mermnad king of Lydia
Gyges	JY-jeez	Bodyguard who became king
Candaules	kan-DAW-leez	King who had to be believed
Solon	SOH-lon	Athenian lawgiver, counted no living man happy
Cyrus	SY-rus	Founder of the Persian empire in this telling
Astyages	as-TY-uh-jeez	Median king, Cyrus's grandfather
Tomyris	TOM-ih-ris	Queen of the Massagetae
Cambyses	kam-BY-seez	Son of Cyrus, conqueror of Egypt
Darius	duh-RY-us	One of the seven, then king
Xerxes	ZURK-seez	Son of Darius, led the great invasion
Leonidas	lee-ON-ih-das	Spartan king at Thermopylae
Themistocles	theh-MIS-toh-kleez	Athenian who read the wooden wall as ships
Artemisia	ar-teh-MIZ-ee-uh	Queen of Halicarnassus, fought for Xerxes
Thermopylae	ther-MOP-ih-lee	The Hot Gates, the pass
Halicarnassus	hal-ih-kar-NASS-us	Herodotus's city, in Caria

A FEW WORDS HE RELIES ON

TERMS

Word	In this book
Inquiry, historiē	Not a chronicle: a search, with sources named when he has them
Barbarian	His word for non-Greek. A description of speech, later an insult
Earth and water	The signs of giving the king your land
Tyrant	A sole ruler of a Greek city, not always a monster in his usage
Oracle	A shrine that answers, often in verse, often too late or too wide
Immortals	The Persian ten thousand, replaced when a man fell, so the number did not die

Word	In this book
Satrapy	A province of the empire, with a tribute

The nine books were later named for the Muses: Clio, Euterpe, Thalia, Melpomene, Terpsichore, Erato, Polymnia, Urania, Calliope. Herodotus did not give them those names. The division into nine is old. The Muses are a librarian's poetry.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Which name in the table had you been saying differently, and does the sound change the person?
2. Why keep his word barbarian in the notes, if the retelling mostly refuses it?

CHAPTER 32: HOW TO READ HIM, AND WHAT TO ASK

Herodotus says he is obliged to report what is said, and not obliged to believe it. That is the rule of the book, and the rule for using the book. He travelled. He asked priests, heralds, exiles, and the children of the people who had fought. He also arranged. Speeches in the Histories are not transcripts. Oracles arrive on time. Wonders get more sentences than tax lists, except when the tax list is the wonder. Use this chapter as a way back through the others.

THEMES WORTH A SECOND PASS

QUESTIONS THE INQUIRY KEEPS ASKING

Theme	Where it shows	The pressure
Prosperity is unstable	Solon, Croesus, Polycrates hinted, Xerxes weeping	The end has not happened yet
Oracles are true and trap you	Gyges' fifth generation, the great empire, the wooden wall	You still have to interpret
Custom is king	Egypt reversed, Scythian deaths for foreign rites, Persian truth-telling	He reports difference and sometimes ranks it
Freedom and discipline	Athens after the tyrants, Sparta at the pass, Ionians at Lade	Not the same thing
Women who decide	Candaules' queen, Tomyris, Gorgo, Artemisia, Phaedyia	The credit usually travels elsewhere
The edge of the map	Ants, griffins, the Nile, the feathers that are snow	Report, then decide whether to believe

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS BY THEME

On war. The Persian account says the Greeks were fools to fight over a seized woman, and then Darius and Xerxes cross the sea over a burned temple and a dinner-time insult. Is the Histories a book against revenge, or a book that thinks some injuries have to be answered?

On truth. Pick one story he marks as hearsay and one he marks as having seen. What does the prose do differently? If you cannot tell, what does that say about his skill?

On power. Cyrus, Cambyses, Darius, and Xerxes are four answers to the question Darius argued at the council of seven. Which reign does the book finally trust, if any?

On us and them. He calls non-Greeks barbarians and then gives Tomyris, Amasis, and the Egyptian priests more sense than several Greek tyrants. Can a writer escape a category he still uses?

On the last page. Soft countries breed soft men, Cyrus says, and the Persians choose hardship. The Greeks who have just won are about to build an empire of their own, which this book refuses to narrate. Finish the sentence he left open.

A note on this retelling

This is original Mythopouch wording for readers aged 15 and up. It is not the ancient Greek, and it is not the 1904 Henry Cary translation used as the narrative source. Seizures, executions, and the humiliation of the dead are told because they are what the inquiry records, not as spectacle. Where modern scholarship commonly parts from him (the size of Xerxes' army, the meeting of Solon and Croesus, the madness of Cambyses) the notes say so.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Which chapter felt most like a wonder, and which most like an inquiry? Were they ever the same chapter?
2. If you could ask Herodotus one question and require him to say whether he believed the answer, what would you ask?
3. The first sentence promises that great deeds will not be rubbed out by time. After Plataea, whose deeds has he actually saved?