

## **“Madness and Psychological Slavery: Why The Persian Kings Are Not Free”**

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The *Histories* of Herodotus compels careful readers to think deeply about fundamental human questions regarding the nature of justice, freedom, greatness, and myriad other ideas central to the human experience. This paper will explore and attempt to define the relationship between two of these concepts: freedom and equality. Herodotus’ thinking connecting the two topics is complex and nuanced, but his *logos* ultimately concludes that political equality is a prerequisite for meaningful human freedom. If a man is granted complete “freedom” to do whatever he wishes, as is the case with the Persian kings, he will inevitably suffer from a madness that denies his ability to actually be free. Persian slavery (which is to say its lack of freedom) is guaranteed by its central tenet of extreme inequality. The four Persian kings -- Cyrus, Cambyses, Darius, and Xerxes -- evidence this point. Though some within this group display this madness in more direct ways than others, all of them suffer from essentially the same lunacy as a result of their total “freedom” and the inevitable taste for conquest that follows from such a condition.

The Persian regime represents the zenith of inequality among its citizenry. We can look towards all four Persian kings to evidence this fact. The Persian spirit openly embraces inequality and in fact equates freedom with inequality. Cyrus demonstrates this when he appeals to the Persians to revolt and says, “Men of Persia, Here is where you stand: if you will obey me, you will have good days like today... and you will not have to work like slaves. If you do not

obey me, you will have to perform countless labors fit for slaves... obey me and be free.”<sup>1</sup> Cyrus goes on to attribute these statements to “divine providence” and assert “that this opportunity was meant to fall into [his] hands.”<sup>2</sup> The Persian masses find this reasoning very persuasive, as Cyrus’ rallying cry rouses them into a successful revolt against Astyages.

This revolt is the first of many Persian conquests in Book I. As Book I continues, Cyrus acquires more and more land for the Persian Empire, eventually subjugating “all of the mainland of Asia to his rule.”<sup>3</sup> This expansion terminates with Cyrus’ death at the end of Book I. Cyrus “himself met his end” in a battle with the Massageti.<sup>4</sup> The context surrounding Cyrus’ death suggest that he died in a state of obsession for expansion that ought to make us ponder whether he was truly free. Two scenes support this claim: the exchange with Tomyris, the Queen of the Massageti, preceding the battle and Cyrus’ dream of Darius.

Cyrus originally attempts to conquer the Massageti by marrying Tomyris. Tomyris “astutely grasped [Cyrus’] real intention”<sup>5</sup> in courting her and rejects his advances. In response, Cyrus “constructs a bridge of boats so that his army could cross” the river that separated the Persians from Massageti territory. This action prefigures Xerxes’ bridging the Hellespont later in Book VII, perhaps the ultimate act of hubris in all of Herodotus’ work where Xerxes attempts to literally reconstruct the earth. Upon learning of the construction of the bridge, Tomyris sends a message asking him to “cease his labors.”<sup>6</sup> In words that at least somewhat echo Solon’s wisdom about the fickleness of human affairs earlier in Book I, Tomyris asserts, “you cannot know

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<sup>1</sup> 1.127.5-6

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*

<sup>3</sup> 1.178.1

<sup>4</sup> 1.214.3

<sup>5</sup> 1.205.1

<sup>6</sup> 1.206.1

whether this project will prove to be advantageous to you. So stop; be satisfied with reigning over your own people and endure the sight of me ruling over the subjects that I have now.”<sup>7</sup> In other words, Tomyris is literally giving Cyrus an easy way out; she is essentially granting him a free pass out of the battle that will end up killing him. Additionally, Tomyris also gives Cyrus the option to fight on the Persian side of the river instead of on the Massageti’s side.<sup>8</sup> With these options on the table, Croesus gives the suspect advice to still cross the river. Despite Tomyris’ blunt admission that she does not seek conquest, Croesus insists that “if the Massageti should win, it is quite obvious that they will not retreat but will march on your other provinces.”<sup>9</sup> This advice simply does not make much sense since there is no evidence to suggest that Tomyris is not being sincere. In light of Croesus’ highly suspect advice, Cyrus decides to reject both of these options and fight the Massageti on their side of the river.

This exchange ought to make us question to what extent Cyrus was still thinking rationally at this point in Herodotus’ narrative. Cyrus has mostly been presented as a rational, even highly thoughtful, actor up until this point, yet further investigation reveals his apparent obsession with expanding conquest merely for conquest’s sake. The chapters involving Cyrus’ dream about Darius immediately follow the chapters discussed above. Cyrus dreams that Darius bears “wings on his shoulders, one of them casting a shadow over Asia, the other over Europe.”<sup>10</sup> He misinterprets this dream to mean that there is an active plot against him. Herodotus points out that the true meaning of the dream is that Cyrus “was was about to die right there and Darius

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<sup>7</sup> *Id.*

<sup>8</sup> *Id.*

<sup>9</sup> 1.207.3

<sup>10</sup> 1.209.1

would ultimately succeed to his throne.”<sup>11</sup> Seeing as the very next few chapters lead directly into Cyrus’ death at the conclusion of Book I, it makes sense to infer that Herodotus leads us to draw a connection between Cyrus’ paranoia over being dethroned, his obsession with expansion at all costs, and his death. Cyrus’ lust for territorial expansion catalyzes his downfall in a direct way. As readers, we are forced to confront the fact that it is impossible to consider Cyrus as a wholly rational actor at this point. Cyrus seems to lack precisely the rationality that separates mad men from sane men. It follows that Cyrus cannot be free, for who can argue that mad men are free men? The situation presented here becomes especially striking when one considers Cyrus’ words that close the entire *Histories*. In the midst of the successful expansion presented in Book I, some Persians ask Cyrus to relocate away from Persia to more fertile lands. Cyrus responds to this request by telling the men that “they should prepare to be rulers no longer, but rather to become subjects under the rule of another... because soft places tend to produce soft men.”<sup>12</sup> This line of thinking provides a powerful argument against a central rationale for expansion. It is striking that it comes from the very lips of the man who would later seek out an expansion of his empire that would lead to his death. Herodotus suggests a sort of dynamism in his account of Cyrus. As Cyrus becomes more and more powerful, conquering an ever-expanding swath of territory, he devolves into a subtle madness that leads to his demise. Cyrus is the first of the four Persian kings in the *Histories* to demonstrate that the seemingly unlimited freedom of the position of kingship is ultimately a damning sentence to be a slave to the caprices of madness.

In contrast to Cyrus’ subtle madness, Herodotus overtly present and confirms the madness in his direct successor, Cambyses. There are several episodes that are intended to

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<sup>11</sup> 1.210.1

<sup>12</sup> 9.122.3

clearly demonstrate the mad tendencies of Cambyses. He abuses the corpse of Amasis, burning the corpse and thus committing an “outrage against religion, for the Persians believe that fire is a god.”<sup>13</sup> He kills the Apis cow which the Egyptians considered to be the incarnation of divinity.<sup>14</sup> In an episode that evokes Cyrus’ dream about Darius, Cambyses has a dream in which “he saw a messenger who had come from Persia announcing that Smerdis [his brother] was sitting on the royal throne and touching heaven with his head.”<sup>15</sup> Cambyses interprets this dream to mean that his brother was plotting against him, and he orders Smerdis, his own brother, to be killed. He marries both of his sisters, and later kills one of them.<sup>16</sup>

These instances leave little room to doubt that Cambyses is truly mad. The more interesting question is therefore not *whether* Cambyses was mad, but rather *what* caused his madness. In response to the claim that the stabbing of the Apis cow made Cambyses mad, Herodotus posits that one must have been mad in the first place to commit such an act. He opines, “I am convinced by all the evidence that Cambyses was seriously deranged. Otherwise he would not have endeavored to mock what is sacred and customary...[I]t seems to me that Pindar was right when he said in his poetry that custom is king of all”<sup>17</sup> Cambyses is therefore not necessarily unique in his madness compared to Cyrus or his successors, Darius and Xerxes. The hypothesis posited above, that there is something inherent in the total “freedom” of Persian kingship that inevitably leads to madness (and therefore a sort of psychological slavery), makes sense for both Persian kings we have examined so far.

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<sup>13</sup> 3.16.2

<sup>14</sup> 3.29

<sup>15</sup> 3.30.2

<sup>16</sup> 3.31

<sup>17</sup> 3.38.1-4

In the episode where Cambyses marries his sister (the first time), we see this principle applied directly. Upon Cambyses' consulting the royal judges on the legality of marriage between siblings, the judges said "they had discovered no law that would sanction marriage between a man and his sister, but they had found another law stating that the king of the Persians was permitted to do whatever he wanted."<sup>18</sup> While this response is technically valid, it is evident that the judges were not entirely comfortable with the response, and there are multiple indications that the judges reached this conclusion more out of fear than reason. Herodotus characterizes the response as "both just and safe" and then directly acknowledges fear as a primary motivator when he says, "[T]hey did not break the law because of their fear of Cambyses, but in order that they would not destroy themselves by protecting the law, they discovered another one."<sup>19</sup> Normally applicable cures to mad behavior (i.e., reasonable interpretations by sober judges) are compromised by the all-consuming "freedom" (i.e., madness) of the Persian king. Cambyses is not only mad himself, but he causes those around him to also lose touch with reason.

Cambyses' narrative concludes with a near-death revelation of his misinterpretation of the dream that led to the murder of his brother. After he accidentally wounded himself in the same manner that he wounded the Egyptian cow and amidst (what will be a successful) revolt, Cambyses "was so overwhelmed by the misfortune that the Magus had inflicted on him and by his wound that he regained his sanity."<sup>20</sup> Cambyses only comes to his senses after he has been effectively removed from kingship and knew of his rapidly impending death. This further confirms the notion that there is something inherent in Persian kingship that inevitably denies

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<sup>18</sup> 3.31.4

<sup>19</sup> 3.31.5

<sup>20</sup> 3.64.5

true freedom by instilling slavery through madness. This principle is evidenced through both Cyrus and Cambyses, though in inverse fashion. Cyrus begins as a free, sane man and continuously becomes more of an enslaved, madman as his empire expands. Cambyses begins his rule completely deranged, and only experiences lucidity after he is dethroned by the revolt of the Magus.

After the intermediary rule of the Magus, the next Persian king to rule after Cambyses is Darius. He, like Cyrus, does not immediately appear maddened (and therefore enslaved), but several pieces of evidence reveal that is far more similar rather than distinct to his predecessors. One episode that directly links up Darius with Cambyses involves the former's readiness to mock and disobey custom. In Book I, Herodotus tells us that Persian custom forbids lying and that Persians place a high premium on telling the truth. Truth-telling is such an important concept to the Persians that it makes up one third of the entire Persian curriculum. Young men learn "just three things: to ride horses, to shoot the bow, and to speak the truth."<sup>21</sup> When the seven conspirators are preparing to take over the Persian Empire from the Magus, Darius openly advocates lying. He established a pretext for getting past the guards and states that "where a lie must be told, let it be told. We strive for the same goal whether we lie or tell the truth."<sup>22</sup> By Herodotus' standard given above in regard to the episode where Cambyses stabs the Apis cow, Darius' flagrant disregard for custom certainly borders on madness, if it is not simply mad.

Of the four Persian kings, Darius is the one to make the most cogent theoretical defense of kingship. After the seven conspirators successfully dethroned the Magus, Darius makes an

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<sup>21</sup> 1.136.2

<sup>22</sup> 3.72.4

argument that the Persian regime should remain a monarchy. He summarises his argument by stating, “Where did our freedom come from, who gave it to us? Did it come from the people, from an oligarchy, or from one man?... [S]ince we were freed by one man, we should preserve that form of government. Moreover, we should not let go of our ancestral traditions.”<sup>23</sup> Within its context, there are several suspect components of this argument. Firstly, Darius fails to distinguish between the freedom of the Persian King and the freedom of the people with his use of “our.” As was abundantly clear with Cambyses (and still evident with Cyrus), the freedom of the Persian monarch and the freedom of the Persian people are incomparable. Everything in Herodotus’ work suggests that there is ultimately only one ostensibly “free” human being in Persia: the king. Secondly, there is little logic in the idea that Persia should remain a monarchy because one man “freed” the Persians. The two speeches preceding Darius’ speech make arguments for precisely why many or a few men would provide better leadership than one alone. Darius fails to fully rebut those arguments, choosing instead to say that the traditional is always also the way with the most merit. Finally, Darius’ previous dismissal of the revered Persian custom of truth-telling gives the reader reason to be suspect of his claims about valuing the traditional and the ancestral. Close inspection reveals Darius’ argument to be a collection of contradictions. These contradictions are also apparent in the ethos of Persian kingship, and play a part in leading to the madness of the men who hold that position.

Once Darius becomes king, he displays the same lust for conquest that characterized his predecessors. From the very beginning of his reign, “[t]he power of Darius pervaded everything and everywhere in his realm.”<sup>24</sup> He retakes Babylon,<sup>25</sup> and he eventually continues on to attempt

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<sup>23</sup> 3.82.5

<sup>24</sup> 3.88.3



to conquer the Scythians. While on this campaign, there are several instances where Darius both invokes the mad acts of his predecessors and prefigures the actions of his immediate heir Xerxes. The most notable of these instances is probably when Darius is crossing the Tearos River with his army. Darius leaves a boastful inscription reading in part, “To these springs come Darius... the best and finest of all men, leading his army against the Scythians.”<sup>26</sup> Upon returning from his ultimately failed expedition to conquer Scythia, Darius continues to display signs of kingly madness. For example, he puts Ariandes to death “for trying to act like the equal of Darius.”<sup>27</sup> These pieces of evidence and many others demonstrate that Darius is squarely of a kind with Cyrus and Cambyses. Although it is more subtle than with the case of Cambyses, the position of Persian kingship clearly makes Darius mad in similar ways as his predecessors. This madness inhibits his ability to be free. Darius displays this madness through his actions and in his fundamentally illogical conception of monarchy.

The final Persian king present in the *Histories* is Xerxes. In many ways, Xerxes epitomizes what it means to be the Persian king. His taste for conquest is far-reaching and all-consuming. In invading Greece, Xerxes states he “shall make the boundary of the land of Persia border on the lofty realm of Zeus.”<sup>28</sup> When he is finished in his quest, “there could be no city of men nor race of humans left who would be capable of doing battle with [the Persians]... Thus those we regard as guilty as well as those who are innocent will bear the yoke of slavery.”<sup>29</sup> Here we find the logic of the Persian monarchy stretched to its logical limits. Xerxes seeks not

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<sup>25</sup> 3.159

<sup>26</sup> 4.91.2

<sup>27</sup> 4.166.1

<sup>28</sup> 7.8.3.1

<sup>29</sup> 7.8.3.3

merely to rule over all of Asia but all of the known world. To achieve this will require the collapse of myriad crucial distinctions which reasonable people would recognize. The quote above demonstrates that the distinction between innocence and guilt will effectively collapse, for example. Earth, the domain of humanity, and the heavens (the domain of Zeus) will become coterminous. The natural distinction between Europe and Asia becomes meaningless through Xerxes' bridging of the Hellespont. The distinction between god and man crumbles as a Greek man looks at Xerxes and quips, "Zeus, why do you assume the appearance of a Persian man and call yourself Xerxes instead of Zeus?"<sup>30</sup> The distinction between man and woman becomes distorted after Artemisia fares well in battle and Xerxes proclaims, "My men have become women, and my women, men!"<sup>31</sup> The list could go on, but these examples are perhaps sufficient to demonstrate that everything about Xerxes reflects the madness inherent in the role of Persian kingship. Building upon the foundation of his predecessors, Xerxes and his actions render the world unintelligible by seemingly destroying the distinctions that allow for discernment. Xerxes is not only completely mad himself; he makes the world around him mad as well.

The final story involving Xerxes in the *Histories* illustrates the tragedy that ultimately lies inherent in Persian kingship. Xerxes one-ups even the blatantly apparent madness of Cambyses. In this twisted story, Xerxes capriciously desires his brother's wife and then suddenly shifts his affections towards his brother's daughter. In the end, Xerxes' wife is enraged, his initial love interest is killed and mutilated, and his brother is killed by his own soldiers.<sup>32</sup> Here we find a microscopic illustration of Persian kingship on a larger scale: the "freedom" of the king

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<sup>30</sup> 7.56.2

<sup>31</sup> 8.88.3

<sup>32</sup> 9.108-113

ultimately amounts to little more than destruction, sadness, and regret. In the end, every Persian is a slave. Those who are not the king are slaves to the caprices of their despot. The king himself is a slave to an even crueler master: the legal capability to do whatever one wants. As all four Persian kings demonstrated, this lack of constraints breeds an undeniable madness in the mind of man. This madness results in a type of slavery all its own. Herodotus therefore argues that true freedom requires both a certain constraint and a certain equality among citizens; it requires the acknowledgment that *nomos* is ultimately king and master of all.