THE TRAGIC PORTRAIT OF XERXES
IN AESCHYLUS AND HERODOTUS

by

Danielle Victoria Megaffin

Thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the Degree of
Bachelor of Arts with
Honours in Classics

Acadia University
March, 2010

© Copyright by Danielle Victoria Megaffin
This thesis by Danielle Victoria Megaffin

is accepted in its present form by the

Department of History and Classics

as satisfying the thesis requirements for the degree of

Bachelor of Arts with Honours

Approved by the Thesis Supervisor

__________________________ ____________________

(Dr. Vernon Provencal) Date

Approved by the Head of the Department

__________________________ ____________________

(Dr. Paul Doerr) Date

Approved by the Honours Committee

__________________________ ____________________

(Dr. Sonia Hewitt) Date
I, Danielle Victoria Megaffin, grant permission to the University Librarian at Acadia University to reproduce, loan or distribute copies of my thesis in microform, paper or electronic formats on a non-profit basis. I however, retain the copyright in my thesis.

_________________________________
Signature of Author

_________________________________
Date
For Mom & Dad, Lauren, Jana, Renea and Abby—
and their unconditional support at any hour of the day (or night.)
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Vernon Provencal for his constant patience and encouragement in what has been a long road. I have enjoyed every class he has taught during my undergraduate degree and found all of the information I’ve collected from him over the years to be invaluable to my research. I would also like to thank Dr. Beert Verstraete for being so passionate in his lectures and inspiring the same passion for the Classics in myself. Finally, I would like to thank Dr. Geoffrey Whitehall and Dr. Rachel Brickner for their amazing support along the way.
Table of Contents

Introduction 1

Chapter One:
* A Portrait of Xerxes in History 3

Chapter Two:
* A Portrait of Xerxes in Aeschylus’ Persians 15

Chapter Three:
* A Portrait of Xerxes in Herodotus 28

Conclusion 58

Bibliography 60
Abstract

This thesis examines the tragic portrait of Xerxes found in Aeschylus’ play *Persians* and the Xerxes in Herodotus’ *Histories*. To better understand how the Western portrait of Xerxes developed into a stereotypical barbarian ruler, we must consider all the major ancient sources in which he played a role. It will first consider the primary evidence of the archaeological remains of ancient Persian civilization in the Near East which raises the question: what do we know of this real Xerxes and how much of him is to be found in Western antiquity. In Chapter Two, this question is partially answered by a consideration of the earliest appearance in the *literary* evidence of the Western tradition: the Xerxes of Aeschylus’ *Persians*, a play which dramatizes the retreat of Xerxes back into Asia after he failed to subject Greece to his empire. Chapter Three examines the Xerxes of Herodotus and finds that both Western portraits (the Aeschylean and the Herodotean) depict him as a tragic figure corrupted by the imperialist *nomos* of Persia. These tragic portraits of Xerxes were used as warnings to the Greeks in the 5th century BCE.
Introduction

Famous fictional characters are often amalgamations of various historical prototypes. For example, the Persian Queen, Scheherazade, from the Middle Eastern folk tales of One Thousand and One Nights, was never a real person, yet for centuries she has pervaded eastern and western cultural narratives, due to the historical archetypes found in her character. In other instances, historical figures have acquired almost fictitious qualities and exist in contemporary popular culture as mere outlines of their true selves. The Persian king, Xerxes, can be found everywhere in modern popular culture from the graphic novel to the opera to the Hollywood blockbuster movie. Fascination with Xerxes stems from the Graeco-Roman sources that have bestowed upon him the classic stereotype of an eastern despotic ruler and carved out a place for him in history as the man who nearly enslaved the West. These Western sources, however, assign a very narrow characterization to a real man who once lived and ruled a great empire in the 5th Century BCE. The Xerxes in Western tradition shares similarities with the Xerxes of Achaemenid Persian history but there are also important differences. To better understand how the Western portrait of Xerxes developed into a stereotypical barbarian ruler, we must consider all the major ancient sources in which he played a role. In Chapter One, we shall consider the historical Xerxes as preserved amidst the primary evidence of the archaeological remains of ancient Persian civilization in the Near East. The evidence raises the question: what do we know of this real Xerxes and how much of him is to be found in Western antiquity? The answer to our question will begin in Chapter

---

1 Frank Miller fictionalizes Xerxes and the Battle of Thermopylae in his graphic novel 300. This graphic novel was adapted into a film by the same name in 2007. Handel composed the opera Serse (Xerxes) in 1738 using the same libretto from Cavalli’s earlier opera Xerse (1654).
Two with a consideration of the earliest appearance in the literary evidence of the Western tradition: the Xerxes of Aeschylus’ *Persians*, a play which dramatizes the retreat of Xerxes back into Asia after he failed to subject Greece to his empire. This tragedy won top honours at Athens’ theatre festival in 472 BCE, and perhaps elicited some sympathy from its Athenian audience. The motives behind Aeschylus’ *Persians* and what purpose it served for its Greek audience will be explored in depth. Finally in Chapter Three, we will consider the most complete and for the West the most important source on Xerxes. Herodotus’ *Histories* about the Greco-Persian wars provides the most complex and compelling portrait of the eastern despot to be found in any ancient source. However, his Xerxes is also a construct of his narrative and has been fashioned to impart a lesson to the Greeks. We will consider the Xerxes of Herodotus in the final chapter.
Chapter One

A Portrait of Xerxes in History

The reconstruction of Achaemenid political history is a complex task which involves the amalgamation of disparate sources. These sources constitute an irregular spatial and temporal distribution of evidence and make it difficult to understand all the facets of the Achaemenid dynasty which controlled the first and most expansive world empire in history. It is no surprise, then, that the royal members of that dynasty, shrouded in the imperial formality of an empire, are equally elusive. Xerxes, son of Darius, was the fourth ruler of the Persian Empire and modern historians have assigned to him a relatively well-rounded personality. However, this portrait has been seriously skewed due to Graeco-Roman sources who wrote with quasi-authority on an empire with which they were not actually accustomed. These classical writers and historians stand accused of having marginalized Persian peoples, events, and processes\(^2\) by way of their literary style of historiography which subordinates impartiality and veracity to the creation of narratives. At the same time, the Greeks who lived in the fifth and subsequent centuries (until Alexander the Great’s disassembling of Persian power) were intimately tied to Achaemenid events, at least on the north-west frontier of the empire, and their account of the Persians should not be discounted entirely. To create an historically accurate portrait of Xerxes, a composite of sources must be used and each must be weighed for value according to the context and location in which it originated. This chapter will consider this composite history and the portrait of Xerxes to be found in it. It

will first briefly examine the literary Graeco-Roman sources and their merits in describing Persia, and then will move on to the primary material from the empire itself and the difficulties presented to the historians. Taking these literary and primary sources together, we shall obtain a historical portrait of Xerxes which is considerably different from, and less developed than, that of the Xerxes with whom we are so well acquainted.

**A Summary of Graeco-Roman Xerxes**

As we will see in subsequent chapters, the Xerxes of Graeco-Roman historiography was well-defined. He is undoubtedly so familiar to us today because he was the Persian king who invaded Greece in 480 BCE, and his war led to the celebrated Greek victory which was crucially formative to the survival of modern democracy. The Persians Wars marked the beginnings of a Greek political discourse, literature and art which made an enduring mark on the Western tradition. Xerxes is repeatedly represented in the Graeco-Roman histories as part of this historical turning point. According to Amelie Kuhrt, a leading scholar of ancient Greece and the Near East: “The powerful Greek-generated images and stories have shaped perceptions of Xerxes’ reign, even his personality, to the point where the surviving evidence on this period from elsewhere in the empire has been subordinated to it and twisted to fit our preconceptions.”

The problem is that there are few Persian sources which inform us about Xerxes and these are rife with Western prejudice and bias. Herodotus for example (which Chapter 3 will consider in depth) gives a detailed account of Xerxes famous march in 480 BCE from Sardis, through Thrace and down into Greece. Scholars have studied this route and

---

3 Amelie Kurht, *The Persian Empire: A Corpus of Sources from the Achaemenid Period* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 25
have found Herodotus’ topography and general timeline of the march to be credible. The number of people marching with Xerxes is clearly a dramatic exaggeration, but modern historians are fairly certain that he marched this path with innumerable peoples from all corners of his empire just as Herodotus describes it. In one instance, Herodotus writes that Xerxes stopped by the Scamander River and climbed to the Pergamum citadel of Troy to perform sacrifices. Archaeological evidence at Troy corroborates that cult sacrifices were performed during the Achaemenid period. Herodotus also makes mention of Xerxes’ “review of the army at Doriscus,” which archaeological remains of an Achaemenid period gatehouse and royal fortress corroborate. Modern historians agree that Herodotus should not be used as the ultimate source for Xerxes or Persia, but that he cannot be ignored in his entirety or else history misses out on a significant wealth of information. The same holds true for other Graeco-Roman writers. Justin, a Roman historian who may have written either during the second or third century CE, told the story of the competition over royal succession after Darius’ death. He writes in a narrative, novelistic style just as Herodotus did, and mimics the Herodotean elements of the story: that Xerxes fought with an older brother over the Persian throne, winning it because Xerxes was born while Darius was king while his elder sibling was born while Darius was a private citizen. These stories could be complete fabrications to entertain a Greek or Roman audience; however, Xerxes’ own inscriptions from Persepolis actually echo these stories. We will consider the inscriptions of Xerxes in a later section.

---

5 Kuhrt, 256.
6 Herodotus, 7.59.
7 Kurht, 253.
The Graeco-Roman writers can also give us more insight into basic kingly qualities and powers. The following Graeco-Roman statements are considered legitimate as they tend to imitate the Persian perspective. A Greek eulogy of Cyrus the Younger, who had aspired to the kingship, ascribes to him all the quintessential features of a Persian king: a handsome physique, exceptional military skills, and scrupulous proponent of truth and order. The Greek geographer Strabo (64 BCE to 24 CE) labelled Darius “the most handsome of men,” save for the length of his forearms. The Roman historian Cornelius Nepos (100-24 BCE) also referred to Darius’ exceedingly long arms, and said that he “was above all celebrated for his impressive and beautiful stature; no Persian could outstrip him in courage.” He then continued on to praise Artaxerxes and to say that “he was famed for his justice.” The imperial Greek biographer of Roman times, Plutarch (46-120 CE), also wrote of Artaxerxes and his “greatness of spirit” and how Artaxerxes II was just as benevolent in honour and imitation of the first. Plutarch extended these kingly qualities to encompass other royals, writing that the wife of Darius “was said to have been the most beautiful princess of her time, just as Darius himself was the tallest and handsomest man in Asia, and their daughters resembled their parents.” All these statements correspond with the image that the Persian royalty were themselves trying to project onto their empire. All of these Latin and Greek examples come from post-Herodotean authors; however they have less authority than the archaeological record.

8 Kuhrt, 471.
9 Strabo XV, 3.21. (From Kuhrt, 509.)
10 Cornelius Nepos, Lives of the Great Generals, 21: Kings 1. (From Kuhrt, 508.)
11 Plutarch, Artoxerxes 1.1 (From Kuhrt, 508.)
12 Plutarch Artaxerxes 4.4 (From Kuhrt, 508.)
13 Plutarch, Alexander 21.6 (From Kuhrt, 508-509.)
The bringing of the “empire’s diversity into the royal centres”\textsuperscript{14} was another motif the Graeco-Roman writers ascribed to Persian royal powers. The depiction of the king held up by his subjects was common in Achaemenid art and inscriptions and so the two streams blend together nicely once again. The classical writers will be considered first, with the Achaemenid sources coming in a subsequent section. Showing the king’s table supplied by the fruits and labours of the empire was metaphoric of the “microcosm of empire”\textsuperscript{15} and the importance of subject peoples showing honour to their king. There are brief examples in Xenophon, Ctesias, Strabo and Deinon. The classical examples vary the sentiments behind the gifts to the king—Strabo’s writings have a tone of forceful servitude, while Xenophon’s Persian subjects delight in giving to their king—but the microcosm of empire motif is there nonetheless. The Greek historian Deinon of Colophon (360 BCE) recounts how Xerxes refused foreign food or drink (e.g., from Athens) because he would rather know that what he was consuming was something he had obtained for himself by way of imperial conquest. “They used to set on the king’s table all the delicacies produced by the lands over which he ruled, the first fruits of each. Because Xerxes did not think that princes should use any foreign food or drink, which is why a custom came into being later on.”\textsuperscript{16}

Most of the time, however, the Graeco-Roman accounts do not correspond with the Achaemenid documents, inscriptions, and archaeological remains. Sometimes the two streams of sources completely contradict one another. Thus, we should use the western accounts carefully and only to ‘illuminate or amplify’\textsuperscript{17} the picture of Xerxes/Persia obtained

\textsuperscript{14} Kuhrt, 417-472.
\textsuperscript{15} Kuhrt, 509.
\textsuperscript{16} Deinon ap. Athenaeaus XIV, 652 b-c. (From Kuhrt, 509.)
\textsuperscript{17} Kuhrt, 6.
from actual sources from the empire. For instance, Thucydides was clearly aware of Greek dependence on Persian support\textsuperscript{18} and Ctesias, a doctor at the Persian court, was entrusted to the king and his account, \textit{Persika}, would probably have been a very good source on Persian court culture had it survived intact. We can take all of these accounts with a grain of salt, but we should recognize that the general statements about the empire and kingship probably hold true. It is only when the moralising and narrative motifs begin to pervade the Graeco-Roman sources that one must discard them entirely and understand that they are likely not accurate historical renderings.

\textit{The Disparity of Sources}

A reconstruction of the Achaemenid dynasty from sources from their own empire is a problematic affair. The immense size, the rapid dismemberment, and the diversity in languages amongst the various peoples of the empire have made studying the Persian point of view cumbersome at best. Another troublesome factor is that scholars and archaeologists do not have a solid understanding of the foundations of the Persian empire. Having a strong grasp on the origins of a people is crucial to understanding them. While the basics of the birth of Persia are available, it has proved to be a confusing and disputed matter. Before the growth of the Persian Empire, the political situation in Asia was varied and dynamic. The main hegemony, which encompassed the whole of the Fertile Crescent, was the Assyrian Empire. State archives of Assyria show that it was a highly developed political entity from 750 to 610 BCE, especially in comparison to the kingdoms which bordered its realm. To the north of Assyria, in Anatolia and Armenia, were the kingdoms of Urartu and Phrygia. Little

\textsuperscript{18} Thucydides, \textit{History of the Peloponnesian War}. Translation by Rex Warner.
is known about either kingdom, although archaeological remains of citadels and city walls denote their ability to mobilise manpower in great numbers. To the west of Phrygia lay a more dominant assemblage of power, Lydia, centered on Sardis, in what is now western Turkey. The kingdom of Lydia had gained momentum and risen as a hegemonic power by the seventh century. To the east of the Assyrians, in the Zagros mountain range, existed a spattering of smaller communities, all diverse from one another, but with close ties to the Assyrian Empire. All of these peoples and places eventually become encompassed (in one way or another) under the shadow of Persian history.

As the early kings of the Achaemenid dynasty conquered the lands surrounding Parsa\(^{19}\) and these different peoples all came under Persian rule, so did their languages. At the height of the Persian Empire, Achaemenid power extended from Central Asia in the east to the Greeks in the west, “with fingers of control in the fringes of the Indian subcontinent and elsewhere.”\(^{20}\) This massive territory included the languages: Greek, Old Persian, Elamite, Aramaic, Egyptian, Akkadian and Hebrew. In addition to the disparity of languages, the peoples of the empire all had significantly different customs solidified by years of local tradition. Although some of these traditions conformed to standards of the empire, there still existed many distinctive forms of writing, commemorating the past, art, religion, eating habits, and social and political institutions.\(^{21}\) So, if a historian were to look at just the official religion or just study the palace administrative documents and archaeological remains of the royal centres, she would obtain a limited and misleading portrait of the empire. Most

---

\(^{19}\) Parsa, Achaemenid empire developed around the modern province of Fars, in southern Iran—the ancient name for the region was Parsa- or as the Greeks called it ‘Persis’ our Persia

\(^{20}\) Kuhrt, 22.

\(^{21}\) Kurht, 25.
importantly, many of the sources are from the north-western frontier, with almost no documentation from further to the east. Besides the problems of spatial disparity, there is also a large temporal disparity among the Achaemenid sources with “the bulk of the documentation clustered around the late sixth and early fifth centuries.”

Other problems with the examination of the empire include: rapid dismemberment, precarious placement of archaeological remains, and non-narrative documents. Alexander the Great could not control the vast territories of the empire (a feat the Achaemenids had been able to do for 200 years) and it was quickly dismembered. Sites fell into disrepair and valuable records ceased to be kept. In addition, while archaeological remains of the great cities are priceless in understanding Persia, modern political instability often makes it hard to access these sites. Other sites, like Ecbatana, exist beneath large, urban cities and also remain inaccessible (for the most part) to archaeologists. Non-narrative documents, mainly bureaucratic ones, provide a nice sense of empire administration—demography, food rationing, tribute payments—but do not provide a level of historical understanding like the narrative histories of Graeco-Roman writers.

*Xerxes, a Persian Portrait*

Until the 1970s, the most popular image of the Persian Empire divided it into two halves; the first half, lasting until the end of Darius I’s reign, was denoted by growth and vitality. From 559 to 486 BCE, the empire flourished under the conquests of Cyrus, Cambyses, and Darius. The great capitals of Persepolis and Susa, started by Darius, reflect...
the grandeur of a time of expansion and development. The next 150 years were assigned to be a time of “stagnation and decline” when cultic freedoms were replaced by intolerance, and the empire stopped expanding. This is a completely unfair portrayal, generated once again by the classical writers. There is little evidence that actually depicts Xerxes’ control of the empire as a negative one in comparison to his predecessors. For starters, the evidence is so scant without the Greek accounts, that one cannot really say for one way or the other what the empire was really like under his control; and the evidence we do have from archaeological remains and royal inscriptions suggests that Xerxes continued in the footsteps of his father. Modern scholarship in the 1970s, is more balanced, and views the Achaemenid period of the empire as a time of consolidation and maturity, with Xerxes portrayed as a king who embodied the Persian qualities of kingship and upheld the royal ideologies. The recurring image which appears in the inscriptions of reliefs commissioned by Xerxes is that of an heir worthy of the throne of his father. Not only did he complete Darius’ building projects, especially at Persepolis, but he also extended them. A trilingual inscription of Old Persian, Elamite, and Akkadian, on the coloured, glazed bricks of the Persepolis apadana says, “Xerxes the great king proclaims: By the favour of Auramazda, much that is good did Darius the king, my father. And also by the favour of Auramazda, I added to that work and built more. Me may Auramazda protect, together with the gods, and my kingdom.” In another example, Darius had commissioned a rock cut niche overlooking Lake Van to be inlayed with a royal dedication but died before it could be completed. Xerxes completed this with the trilingual inscription:

---

23 Kuhrt, 28.
24 Older translations spell this as ‘Ahuramazda’, while modern traditions prefer ‘Auramazda.’ They both refer to the same Persian god.
25 Kent, XPg (From Kurht, 211.)
A great god is Auramazda, the greatest of the gods, who created this earth, who
created yonder sky, who created man, created happiness for man, who made Xerxes
king, one king of many, one lord of many.
I (am) Xerxes, the great king, king of kings, king of all kinds of people, king on this
earth far and wide, the son of Darius the king, the Achaemenid.
Xerxes the great king proclaims: King Darius, my father, by the favour of
Auramazda, made much that is good, and this niche he ordered to be cut; as he did
not have an inscription written, the I ordered that this inscription be written.
Me may Auramazda protect, together with the gods, and my kingdom and what I have
done.26

This inscription is characteristic of all the royal ones commissioned during the reign
of Xerxes and his father. The Western tradition likes to put the characters of Xerxes and
Darius at odds, labelling them as polar opposites of one another, but their inscriptions
continually suggest that is just another historical stereotype. Xerxes almost copies verbatim
the text found on Darius’ tomb in his inscription on Mount Elevund. This mimicking links
father and son, and shows the importance of dynastic continuity throughout the empire. The
trilingual inscription reads:

A great god is Auramazda, the greatest of the gods, who created this earth, who
created yonder sky, who created man, created happiness for man, who made Xerxes
king, one king of many, one lord of many. I am Xerxes, the great king, king of kings,

26 Kurht, 411.
king of all kinds of peoples, king of the earth far and wide, son of Darius the Achaemenid.  

Again, a father-son mirror image is found in the south doorway at the Tacara in Persepolis. The inscriptions mirror one another physically and also textually. Darius’ inscription reads, “Darius, the great king, son of Hystaspes, an Achaemenid” while Xerxes’ says, “Xerxes, the son of Darius, an Achaemenid.”

One of the most important aspects of the king was his role in the balancing of truth and order of the empire through the Persian god, Auramazda. Darius’ trilingual text at Behistun was originally considered to be a condemnation of other religious cults and the worshipping of daiva (demons), but is now properly understood to be an explanation of the salvation of the empire through worshipping Auramazda. In order for humanity to be prosperous in life and in death in the hereafter, the people must be loyal to the Persian king, and they must do this by honouring Auramazda above all other deities. Xerxes clarified this imperial ideology in his limestone slab inscriptions in the garrison quarters at Persepolis:

Happy may I be (while) living and (when) dead may I be blessed’, obey that law, which Auramazda has established! Worship Auramazda at the proper time and with the proper ritual! That man who obeys that law which Auramazda has established, and (who) worships Auramazda at the proper time and in the proper ceremonial style, he both becomes happy while living and blessed when dead. Xerxes the king

---

27 Kent, XE and Kent, DE (From Kuhrt, 234.)
proclaims: Me Auramazda protect from evil and my house and this land! This I pray of Auramazda; this may Auramazda grant me.”

The inscriptions from the reign of Xerxes never indicate territory loss. In his 21 years at the helm of the empire, the minor loss of Greece on the north-west fringe of the empire is by no means indicative to his accomplishments. Some inscriptions even mention new territories gained in comparison to Darius.

Xerxes’ death is marked by Babylonian astrological documents, and suggests that he was killed by one of his sons. Although the royal inscriptions do not give one much insight into the character of Xerxes, they show that he was intent on ruling justly like his father and keeping the empire secure.

---

28 Kent, XPh (From Kuhrt, 240.)
29 Babylonian tablet BM 32234 (From Kuhrt, 249.)
Chapter Two

A Portrait of Xerxes in Aeschylus’ Persians

In the spring of 472 BCE, at Athens’ premiere theatre festival, the City Dionysia, the tragedian Aeschylus presented a selection of four plays. The City Dionysia, a celebration of the wine god Dionysus and his return from Boeotia to Athens, commemorated Athenian naval power, which had become the pride of Athens, especially in the wake of the naval victory over the Persians at Salamis in 480 BCE only eight years earlier. One of the plays presented by Aeschylus had an affinity to its debut locale; the Persians dramatized the naval defeat of Persia at Salamis and Xerxes’ retreat back across the Hellespont to Asia. Aeschylus provides ancient and modern scholars with the first and, excepting Herodotus, fullest accounts of Xerxes’ character. As shall be considered later in Chapter 3, it is more than likely that Herodotus’ Xerxes incorporates the Persian king’s character found in Aeschylus’ play.

Aeschylus’ Persians is a multilayered tragedy and its interpretation is readily debated amongst numerous scholars. This chapter will examine how the portrait of Xerxes in Aeschylus can vacillate in sense depending on the medium in which it is examined. It will consider the ideological ‘barbarian’ stereotype and its application to Xerxes when the play is read as a dramatized history, as well as the “collapsing of the ideology”30 when Persians is placed in the performative context of spectacle. It will then consider the “tragic

---

30 Edith Hall, Inventing the Barbarian: Greek Self Definition Through Tragedy, (Clarendon Press, 1989.)
performative” and its influence on Athenian self-identification.\textsuperscript{31} The discussion of the play as a dramatized history (history-as-myth) will discuss the political climate of Athens and its suggested influence on Aeschylus’ artistry. In short we find that, when read as history, \textit{Persians} is more an exploration of “the natural pride of the Athenians in their achievement, and the presentation of the victory of Salamis as the focal moment in the defeat of Persia and the establishment of Greek liberty.”\textsuperscript{32} Mary Ebbot’s and Nicole Loraux’s arguments counter this point with a broad discussion of performed spectacle and tragedy, with tragedy considered as an exploration of “the Self through the Other.”\textsuperscript{33} Using these arguments, a portrait of Xerxes as a tragic hero can be obtained.

\textit{The Ideological Barbarian}

Aeschylus’ \textit{Persians} is undoubtedly the first written account, in Western historiography, which offers political commentary on eastern despotism and imperialism. The failure of some critics of the \textit{Persians} is that they strive to conform conflicting moments of the play to a simple ideology. Therefore, it is crucial to examine the conflicting ideological undertones of the tragedy which reflect the times in which the author was living. Aeschylus’ portrayal of Xerxes as an ideological barbarian serves the play’s purpose to demonstrate the two prevailing themes of Athens at this time: the movement from tyranny to democracy and Athenian national pride.

\textsuperscript{31} Mary Ebbot, “Marginal Figures” in \textit{A Companion to Greek Tragedy} ed. Justina Gregory (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 373
\textsuperscript{32} Philip Vellacot, \textit{Aeschylus: Prometheus Bound and Other Plays} (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1961), 17
\textsuperscript{33} Ebbot, 373.
Aeschylus’ narrative of Xerxes, and the king’s subsequent downfall, would be a familiar plot to the Athenians, on their own Greek side of the Aegean. Athenians had come to imagine the foundations of their political order through “tyrant-slaking,” when Athenian power had been wrested from the tyrant Hippias, son of Pisistratus, and distributed amongst the people. In 508, Clisthenes appealed to the population to institute a new tribunal and weaken the aristocracy. Thucydides wrote of this turnabout: “And in the Hellenic states that were governed by tyrants, the tyrant’s first thought was always of himself, for his own personal safety, and for the greatness of his own family.” Isonomia (equality under the law) became the pillar of Athenian society and was a source of national pride. This theme is rampant throughout the Persians, as it recalls that triumphant spirit of Athenian liberty. In the parados, the Queen asks the Chorus of Persian Elders who is it that leads the Athenian military force, to which the Elders respond: “They are called neither the slaves nor subjects of any single man.” The liberty of the Athenian forces contrasts with the Persian ‘flock’ and their one godlike leader, the tyrant Xerxes.

History is treated as myth in the tragedy and those ideological purposes which are commonly found in histories and orations are seen here as well. Dramatized history (here in the form of tragedy) has many of the same characteristics of the Greek ‘histories’ which followed in the fifth and subsequent centuries. It has been said that, “History has always been used ideologically for purposes other than those ideally professed by historians.”

---

34 David Rosenbloom, Aeschylus: Persians (London: Gerald Duckworth and Co., 2006), 17
35 Thucydides, 1.17.
36 Aeschylus 240, Persians. I use the translation by Philip Vellacott.
the political reading of the play, the ‘historical’ stereotypes of the barbarians and the ideologies of what it was to be Greek can be found. Aeschylus renders his Xerxes into the stereotyped barbaric leader through a series of comparisons, repetitive themes, and dramatic distortions of events.

“Orientalism” is a concept used primarily in postcolonial studies to explain the “subtle and persistent Eurocentric prejudice against Arabo-Islamic peoples and their culture.” Edward Said, in his book, Orientalism (1978), explained that the Western attitude toward the East is an amalgamation of romantic and false images and colonial ambitions. In short, he argues that the West has fabricated artificial ideas about the East which are prevalent in centuries of literature. The Western rhetoric of Orientalism goes back to Aeschylus’ Persians, and can be seen in its imagery of Xerxes and his fellow Persians.

“The sumptuous palace” mentioned in the opening parados of Persians is the first significant eastern stereotype in the Western tradition. Throughout Persians, the materialistic excessiveness of the king, and in turn Persia itself, is recalled time and again. While Xerxes had his “gold-bedecked army,” Athens had her silver. These comparisons present the Persians as a society which possesses more than its allotted portion. It is the Messenger

---

38 At the time of Aeschylus and this play, ‘history’ was not in the Greek’s lexicon. The stereotypes began to be cemented through their continued use by later historians from the 5th Century onwards.
40 Edward Said, Orientalism.
41 Aeschylus, 4.
42 Aeschylus, 11.
43 In 483 BCE, new silver deposits at Laurium were used by the Athenians, with the encouragement of Themistocles, to finance naval building initiatives. The use of ‘silver’ here (as something used for the development of the entire Greek polis) is in direct opposition to the Persian gold, which was sought to amass Persian royal wealth.
44 Lois Spatz, Aeschylus (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1982), 20
who declares it simplest, yet best: “O citadels of Asia, O land of Persia, storehouse of huge wealth!”45 The equating of a life in the lap of luxury to a “softness” of people was a common Greek way of thought, which is a theme in Herodotus. Aeschylus draws on this orientalising concept as well; with reference to the extravagance of Xerxes, he too, is condemning the king to a stereotypical softness of character. This softness is displayed through the excessive emotions Xerxes exhibits: “insatiability and abandoned emotionalism are two of the hallmarks of the barbarian psyche as constructed by this play.” (Hall, 147) The threnos46 between Xerxes and the Chorus at the play’s closing is perhaps one of the most extreme depictions of excessive emotions and it is the longest extant one in Greek tragedy. By the end of the play, “The land of Asia, O King of the country, has terribly, terribly been brought to her knees.”47 This suggests that under the guidance of Xerxes, Asia has been brought to her knees like a weakened woman.48 The linen robes which Xerxes would be wearing, torn by his entrance, would be similar to that of the Chorus’. Greeks considered the garments of barbarians to be effeminate in comparison to their own. In addition to that, the torn nature of Xerxes’ robes further depicts the king’s complete destruction. These exotic costumes on stage would have added to the foreign effect of Xerxes and his fellow Persians.

“Here comes the mother of the King, my Queen, like light from the eyes of gods. We prostrate ourselves, and must all address her with words of salutation.”49 So speaks the Chorus at the end of the parados upon the approach of Queen Atossa. The submissive acts of

---

45 Aeschylus, 250-251.
46 Threnos is a sung dialogue between Xerxes and the Chorus.
47 Aeschylus, 929-30.
48 Edith Hall, Aeschylus’ Persians (Warminster England: Aris & Phillips Ltd., 1996), 170
49 Aeschylus, 150-154.
prostration and the obeisance to the Persian royal family is another eastern orientalising literary device. In Athens, no free-man was accountable to another or called another master. In Persia, the royal family was the highest layer of the social stratigraphy. Consequently, Xerxes will be held solely responsible for the collapse of their empire, whereas the pride of Athenian victory may be shared amongst the whole *polis*. Aeschylus excludes the use of proper names of any Athenians when discussing Salamis, specifically Themistocles, to further portray the battle as a tribute to all of Athens; not just one man, as the Persian Chorus does.

The depictions of extravagances and godlike behaviour are created for the ideology of the Greek moral universe. Aeschylus’ Xerxes is most simply another telling of the overreaching of the mortal into the realm of the gods, where he is punished for his *hybris*. The pattern of arrogance (*hybris*), destructive delusion (*ate*) and punishment (*tisis*) followed by lament is an archetype not just of Aeschylean literature, but goes back to the Homeric epics; and is repeated in post-Aeschylean historical accounts and tragedies. In Aeschylus, the reoccurring symbol of Xerxes’ *hybris* is the ‘yoking’ of the Hellespont. It is unnatural that Xerxes has attempted to conquer the natural elements, and for that he must face divine retribution. His ‘desire to rule an empire embracing two continents’ is in violation of the ‘nature, divinity and the freedom that is characteristic of the Greek polis.’

---

50 Spatz, 20.
51 Greek word meaning ‘city-state.’
52 Book 8 of Herodotus details how the cunning of Themistocles won the decisive Battle of Salamis. Thucydides sent a servant, Sinnicus, to tell the Persians about infighting amongst the allied Greek states and trick the Persians fleet into the Straights, where their numbers would be of no use in battle.
53 Rosenbloom, 39.
54 Hubris
55 The bridge between Europe and Asia.
56 Rosenbloom, 43.
episode\textsuperscript{57} is the one which most heavily sets forth the Greek ideology and the reason for Persia’s failure of empire. Darius, most arguably the voice of Aeschylus, climatically states: “Lend your souls to pleasure a day at a time, despite the difficulties, since wealth is of no use to the dead.”\textsuperscript{58} Darius also admonishes Xerxes for his godless designs and treatment of the Hellenic gods. “When they went to the land of Greece they were not ashamed to steal images of gods, nor to set fire to temples; altars vanished from sight, and the shrines of the gods were uprooted from their foundations . . .”\textsuperscript{59} In \textit{Persians}, the Persian characters act and are acted upon in the moral universe of the Greeks, and so what Aeschylus has presented is a Xerxes who is a warning to the moral travesty, which Rosenbloom considers the “delusion of invulnerability.” This delusion is present in the Greek language of the play. The use of the terms ‘much’ and ‘many’\textsuperscript{60} are prevalent, as are the numerical lists (with no specific numbers) which pepper the opening parados. The Chorus lists the ‘incalculable horde’ of the Egyptian Nile, the ‘crowd of Lydians’, ‘numerous chariots’, and the ‘hordes of every kind’ from Babylon.\textsuperscript{61} Thus Chorus, too, suffers from the “delusion of invulnerability.”

We can see that the \textit{Persians} orientalises history by dramatizing and underwriting it with a Greek ideology that depicts what it is to be non-Greek by portraying a stereotypical barbarian. Now we must consider what the intended effect was to be on the Athenians in 472 BCE. On one level the play is a celebration of the Athenian naval power, most certainly, because Aeschylus omits the other pivotal battles of the Persian Wars, Plataea and Mycale, which were Spartan-led victories. However, if it was just a celebration of Salamis, there

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{57} Aeschylus, 668.
\item \textsuperscript{58} Aeschylus, 89.
\item \textsuperscript{59} Aeschylus, 808-812.
\item \textsuperscript{60} Rosenbloom, 40.
\item \textsuperscript{61} Aeschylus, 38.
\end{itemize}
would be much less emphasis placed on the hybris of Xerxes as the real culprit responsible for the fall of the Persian Empire. As Rosenbloom puts it, *Persians* is much more “a meditation on the limits of wealth, power and success and their ruin on societies” than the victory at Salamis. Some scholarship suggests that Xerxes’ hybris and subsequent ruin was a warning to the infant Athenian empire. At the time of Aeschylus’ writing however, the Athenian empire would have been in too rudimentary a state, and it is perhaps after knowing the later history of Athenian imperialism that one sees all the layers of foreboding in this play. In 472 BCE, the Delian League was in its infancy, and Themistocles had convinced the Athenians (to the dismay of Sparta) to fortify their city and ‘the whole population was to work at building the walls.’

So, Athens had hardly reached its pinnacle of empire. The Athenian empire would come into full fruition later with the movement of the Delian League from Delos to Athens in 454, and the outbreak of war with Sparta in 431. Because *Persians* was produced in the infancy of the Athenian empire, it is difficult to say how much of a warning Aeschylus was trying to impart to his Athenian audience. Aeschylus may have been aware, however, of how quickly Athens was moving toward empire in the 470s, and therefore he may have presented a subtle warning to overreaching one’s boundaries. For indeed, the Athenians would in time develop the same “delusion of invulnerability” as Aeschylus portrays in Xerxes.

*Identity in Tragedy, Xerxes in Spectacle*

In their second invasion led by Xerxes in 480 BCE, the Persians had sacked Athens in its entirety. Countless Athenian lives were lost. With this in mind, we might ask how it is

---

62 Thucydides, 1.90.
possible even to begin to consider the *Persians* as a tragedy that would elicit a response of sympathy from an audience whose lives were so devastated by the invading forces. How could a populace so devastated by the greed and vengeance of one man, ever consider him to be a tragic character on stage?

Scholars have allocated to Aeschylus’ Xerxes the role of “tragic hero” and *Persians* is rife with tragic archetypes with which the Athenians were familiar by 472 BCE. Although 19th Century criticism of the play called into question its “tragic” status\(^{63}\), Hall argues that this point is moot, as there is no way this play could have been staged as part of the City Dionysia (and crowned victorious) if it were not a tragedy.\(^{64}\) The definition of ‘tragic’ would not even come into existence until Aristotle’s *Poetics* a century later. A comparison of *Persians* with the familiar themes of Greek literature, both epic and tragedy, is the first step in establishing Xerxes’ as more than a hubristic, violent barbarian.

Athenians would have readily identified the *nostos* element of the *Persians*. *Nostos* (plural *nostoi*) is a Greek word signifying ‘homecoming’ and which refers to the anxiously long-awaited arrival of a hero coming home from war. Homer’s *Odyssey* is a story of *nostos*, as Odysseus makes his ten year tumultuous journey throughout the Aegean on his way back from Troy. In these stories, it is the hero who has offended the gods in some way and must seek to win back their favour in order to complete their voyage home. Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* is a tragedy which was presented at the City Dionysia after the *Persians*, in the year 458 BCE and it deals with the homecoming of Agamemnon, King of Argos, after his

\(^{63}\) Hall, 17.
\(^{64}\) Hall, 16. Aristotle’s *Poetics* was the first extant treatise on dramatic theory; he explored the context of what constituted tragedy, along with the other genres of ‘poetry.’
victory in the Trojan War. Agamemnon’s sacrifice of his own daughter, Iphigenia, to gain favourable winds to Troy had angered the gods and his wife Clytemnestra. Agamemon’s murder is the divine retribution fated to ensue because of his murder of his daughter.

As we have seen, *Persians* is not a play that hinges upon the collective errors of the Persian empire; rather it is a play about one man and his hybris. Greek tragedies commonly are about the *oikos* (family) as well as the *polis*, and *Persians* is no different. Aeschylus composes a tragedy that is more about the triangle of familial mother-father-son, rather than royal queen-king-king. In the Queen’s dream, Xerxes fails at yoking two women to his chariot (a symbol of his bridging of the Hellespont) and when Xerxes “fell out, his father Darius stood close by, pitying him. When Xerxes saw him he tore his robes around his body.”65 It is not until Xerxes witnesses his father’s pity that he truly laments. It is Darius’s ghost who draws attention to the suffering of all of Persia, not Xerxes his son, which renders Xerxes abandoned by his father and his *oikos*. Xerxes had tried to avenge his father, but his father is only interested in the fate of Persia.

A similarity between the Xerxes of Aeschylus and the one of Herodotus is the structural tragic element which Rosenbloom calls “the tragedy of succession.” In both Herodotus and Aeschylus, it is the blessing of the empire which has turned into a curse as the imperial empire knows of no satiation and every subsequent king feels he must expand just as the king before him did. The tragedy is that at some point the king will not be able to live up to his predecessor’s achievements and will undoubtedly fail. In Herodotus, kings in Asia before Xerxes had ruined their empires with their own *hubris* and *ate*. (This will be discussed

---

65 Aeschylus, 196-198.
in greater length in the following chapter.) The key difference in Aeschylus is that it is Xerxes alone who shoulders the blame for the ruin of Persia. The Aeschylean Darius is painted as a divine ruler whom the Chorus sings “never killed our men through the ruinous waste of war”\(^66\) (Even though the Athenians were aware that the Persian disaster at Marathon was Darius’ failure.) Darius reprimands Xerxes for his son’s bridging of the two continents and his destruction of Hellas temples; however, he himself bridged the Bosphorus\(^67\) and laid to waste the temples of gods on his way to Marathon. In many Aeschylean tragedies the curse of divine retribution is an inherited one, the \textit{Oresteia} being a trilogy\(^68\) devoted to one family curse in the House of Atreus. The curse in \textit{Persians} is the superlative paternal blessing and happiness\(^69\) and its confliction with the ideology of imperialism, that in order to be an empire, one must keep expanding and achieve more than your predecessors. “The blessing of empire eventually becomes a curse as it can never be satiated.”\(^70\) Thus, Xerxes as Great King of Persia is almost required to avenge his father’s follies and to conquer more land than those who had come before him. But it is this overextension that is his hubris. Xerxes is therefore in a ‘no-win’ situation.\(^71\) Rosenbloom states that the ‘tragedy focuses on the imperative for a son, and indeed, a younger generation, to attain the standard of their fathers.’\(^72\)

Other familiar archetypes of tragedy are extensive throughout Aeschylus. The messenger scene is fundamental to the narrative\(^73\), occurring when a messenger relays what

\(^{66}\) Aeschylus, 652-653.  
\(^{67}\) The straight which connects the Black Sea to the Mediterranean; today, the Istanbul Straight.  
\(^{68}\) Perhaps a tetralogy, but the fourth satyr-play it was presented with has been lost.  
\(^{69}\) Rosenbloom, 93.  
\(^{70}\) Rosenbloom, 92.  
\(^{71}\) Rosenbloom, 93.  
\(^{72}\) Rosenbloom, 93.  
\(^{73}\) Aeschylus, 252.
has happened and the emotions behind its happening to the Chorus and other gathered characters. It, too, would be familiar as signifying the tragic feeling to the Athenian audience. The metres and rhythm in the singing and the dancing of the Chorus members would also be recognizable as tragic. This merger of barbarian content and Hellenic form made the tragedy more accessible to the audience, as opposed to the Athenians simply viewing themselves as the opposition.

Athenian audiences would be put at ease by these familiar elements of tragedy, but the sympathy for the tragic Xerxes does not end there. The barbarian stereotype of Xerxes revealed in political readings of Aeschylus, which was discussed earlier, collapses when *Persians* is regarded in a performative context of spectacle. Mary Ebbot, following Edith Hall, explains how the ideology behind the barbarian stereotype “does not operate in tragedy” as it does in the Greek orators and historians. Michelle Gellrich echoes this view with: “the problem with readings of tragedy that seek to demonstrate its ideological character is that they are impervious to the ways in which performance eludes ideological constraints.” In short, the performance transcends the ideology of the barbarian stereotype. One of the most important elements of performance in Greek theatre was the mask. The earlier tragedies, like those of Aeschylus, had masks that were made of cloth and would allow the audience to still recognize the actor below to be Greek, as opposed to the barbarian he was playing. Claude Calame theorizes that “the mask transforms the actor to the Other, but not entirely.” The Greeks would identify with all the losses on opposing sides, Greek and non-Greek, with the blending of the two in the actor on stage. When Aeschylus’ *Persians* was

---

74 Ebbot, 373.
75 Ebbot, 373.
76 Ebbot, 374.
viewed in the theatre, the tragic performance collapsed the ideological polarity of the barbarian stereotype, and this enabled the Athenian audience to empathize.

Nicole Loraux suggests that if the tragedy were simply read its performative meaning would be lost and the play would be solely interpreted as an homage to Athenian prowess. Performed, however, the Athenians would recognize *Persians* on its tragic scale and they would have been invited, by contemplation of the play, to engage in the lament for Persian defeat alongside of Xerxes. In this sense, tragedy has transcended the Athenians’ own identity and engaged them with the Persians in a lament for humanity on a universal level. Through contemplating the Self through the Other, a method of self-discovery commonplace in Greek-identity thought\(^77\), the Athenians were able to understand more about their own identity through the differences and similarities they watched on stage in the *Persians*.

Aeschylus’ Xerxes is both a vehemently stereotyped barbarian and a tragic figure allowing for identity contemplation. Which Xerxes was intended to be presented by Aeschylus cannot be known, but it is obvious that there were several different interests vying to be represented in his *Persians*. Pericles produced the play for his own political motives\(^78\) and in celebration of Athenian power; nonetheless, Xerxes in performance is a tragic figure that would have been capable of leading the Athenian audience to a higher level of reflection of themselves through the Persian mirror.

---

\(^{77}\) Greeks identified themselves in opposition of all things Other: Citizens v. Aliens, Free v. Slave, Men v. Women, etc.

\(^{78}\) Pericles, son of Xanthippus, financed this play and it is thought he did so for personal, political motives which included disassociating his maternal side from a rumour that they were Persian supporters, as well as reminding the audience of the shackles of the Hellespont which had been brought home under his father’s command.
Chapter 3
A Portrait of Xerxes in Herodotus

The Chronology of Polarity

The ethnocentric and derogatory stereotyping of barbarians to be found in 5th century Greek literature is not present in Homer. In fact, Homer bears “little to no trace”79 of the othering of the Barbarian through the disparaging practice of orientalising. It is only in the illustrious Catalogue of Ships at the end of Book 2 of the Iliad that we find any derivative of the Greek word for ‘barbarian’ (βάρβαρος) is used. The participle barbarophonoi (literally ‘of non-Greek or barbarian speaking’) is used in reference to the Trojan allied Carians, but it does not appear to carry with it any negative connotation; rather it only implies basic adjectival description. Somewhere between the writings of Homer and Herodotus the term βάρβαρος underwent a metamorphosis from an onomatopoeic term suggesting vocal babble to a suggestion of uncivilized, primitive and savage nature with little emphasis on the linguistic aspects. Beginning with the Greeks, the term barbarian came to be used in ethnocentric stereotyping of languages not included in the ‘dominant imperial hegemony’80 of the times. It is this chronology of the word which provides the starting point for our study of the portrait of Xerxes in Herodotus. By the time of Herodotus’ Histories in the 5th century BCE, the opinion of the barbarians prevalent in the consciousness of Classical Greeks was so polarized toward the negative stereotype that Herodotus’ Xerxes must be considered with this

79 Cartledge, 53.
80 Claude Rawson
perception in mind—especially, because Herodotus attitude to Xerxes was “hugely untypical.”

When we consider Homer, it is apparent that the Homeric Greeks were scarcely sentient of their nationality as defined in opposition to the Trojans. The greatness of the Trojan War for the Greeks lay in their ability to demonstrate the worthiness of their opponents. The Trojan forces who live on the other side of the Aegean are not depicted as savage, weak barbarians; rather they are simply an opposing force living in the same moral universe as the Greeks, worshipping the same gods and respecting the same cultural norms. Although in Homer, the Trojans are the non-Greek barbarians, and in this respect the same as the Persians of Herodotus, Homer’s Trojans are not presented in the same manner as we find in later Classical Greek depictions of the barbarian. The ‘others’ of Homer, are the ‘others’ who share a “perceived identity and sense of similarity” with the Greeks, linked by their shared social and political characteristics. For example, both the Achaeans and the Trojans are ruled by kings and are devoted to the Greek pantheon. In the alien sense of the Other, “those with whom no such sense of corporate solidarity is recognized” appeared in the social consciousness much later. Even the harsh and relatively primitive 7th and 6th centuries were not breeding grounds for the negative stereotype to follow. As Greece emerged from the Dark Age, Near Eastern philosophy, art, and mythology had been absorbed into and honoured within Greek culture. Greek encounters with the neo-Assyrian Empire in the 8th and 7th centuries led to Greek artisans fashioning their works under Near Eastern and

---

81 Cartledge, 53.
83 Ann Gunter, Greek Art and the Orient. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 32
Egyptian stimuli, which were very widespread thanks to the growth of trade routes. Phoenician and other oriental influences are seen in tombs of this time in mainland Greece, and the Greek *koroι* (nude male youths) of the archaic period are clearly modelled on earlier Egyptian colossal male statuary. In Lesbos, the brother of the poet Alkaios incurred no social stigma from his mercenary work in Asia, and the Athenian Alkmaion increased his status by financial aid from a Near Eastern backer.\(^8^4\) So what is it that changed this mutual respect between Greece and Asia into the hostile relationship rampant in the literature, oratories, tragedies, and philosophies of ancient Greece?

Scholars cite the Persian War as the catalyst of the hatred of Persia and the beginnings of binary distinctions between West and East. Achaemenid scholars, Amelie Kurht and Heleen Sancisi-Weedenburg, believe that the Persian Wars remains the centrifugal force in the continuity of this divide today. “The Persian Wars are not over yet, and one might be tempted to see in the repeatedly uttered accusations of ‘hellenocentricism’ and ‘iranocentricism’ in scholarly literature a sign of continued warfare.”\(^8^5\) If the wars did not mark the commencement of the abhorrence of barbarians, they definitely aided in laying the foundation for the prejudice. After the Persian defeat in 480-79, the concept of ‘Pan-Hellenism’ grew out of a combined pride of Greek prowess and fear of further barbarian threat. It was also cultivated by the manoeuvrings and manipulations of those with Athenian imperial interests such as we find in the 4th Century Athenian orator Isokrates. Panhellenism (all Greek) was a form of Athenian propaganda which began with the idea that all of Greece

\(^8^4\) Cartledge
had successfully united in the face of the threat of barbarian hordes. It is historical fact, however, that out of the approximate 700 independent Greek city-states, only thirty to forty of them came together in war. By celebrating the defeat as Panhellenic, the Athenians could encourage those city-states who might dissent in the face of the growth of Athenian power to join them in the ‘Panhellenic’ mission of the Delian League in order to avenge Greece and punish Persia. Identity boundaries are points of exclusion, wherein, when you unify one section, you automatically exclude the other. The Athenians used their Panhellenic unity to exclude and distinguish themselves against the barbarians for their own national purposes. This concept of pan-Hellenism was more broadly developed in the 4th century by the fear mongering of Isokrates, a plutocrat who believed that a revolution from below would result in the redistribution of Greek property. He stoked the flames of fear of another Persian invasion, insisting that Greek forces confiscate land for the impoverished masses of Greece from the Persian Empire. Athenian stereotypes of the barbarian were already rampant in the theatre. A common theme in Euripides’ Hecuba and Medea, is the comparison of violence of women with the violence of the barbarian. This violence against the Other is denoted particularly in a passage of Hecuba, wherein Agamemnon tells the enraged Polymestor to “expel the barbarian element from his heart,” and it is clear that barbarian is used here as a “synonym for uncontrolled violence.” The speeches which Greek orators made before the Athenian popular jury courts also nurtured the barbarian stereotype.

86 Cartledge, 57-58.  
88 Segal, 111.
The Greek-barbarian polarity was a hallmark of Greek mentality by the time of Aristotle and his treatise on ‘natural slavery’ in *The Politics*. The Hellenocentrism of Aristotle is present throughout his *Politics*, for instance when he states: “The Asiatic nations have in their souls both intellect and skill, but are lacking in spirit; so they remain enslaved and subject.” The polar dichotomy, in which Greeks defined themselves, and the historical fact that the majority of slaves in the Greek world were barbarians, provided the perfect climate for Aristotelian philosophy to flourish. Aristotle wrote that barbarians, being incapable of self-government, were naturally slaves and needed a master to serve under. He explains his reasoning behind the concept of “slave by nature” by stating: “Whenever there is the same wide discrepancy between human beings as there is between soul and body or between man and beast, then those whose condition is such that their function is the use of their bodies and nothing better can be expected of them, those, I say, are slaves by nature.” This allowed for Greeks to view themselves ultimately as culturally superior and made it easy for the pejorative stereotype of the Other to fester within the agora. Aristotle also contributed, along with Xenophon and Hippocrates, to the Greek ‘pseudo-science’ of ethnology, which was very popular in Classical Greece. This pseudo-science linked the qualities and characteristics of a race of people with the surrounding natural environment in an attempt to explain Greece’s moral and cultural strength and superiority. Aristotle writes of the “Influence of Climate” and describes the Greece’s “mid-position geographically” as part of the reason Greeks are “both spirited and intellectual.”

---

92 Cartledge, 55-56.
Hippokrates\textsuperscript{94} wrote, “The small variations of climate to which the Asiatics are subject, extremes both of heat and of cold being avoided, account for their mental flabbiness and cowardice.”\textsuperscript{95} Xenophon’s \textit{Anabasis} also pits the barbaric cultural habits he saw along his travels ‘up country’\textsuperscript{96} against the normative standard of the Greeks when he suggested that the savageness of the Mossynoeci on the Black Sea was due, in part, to their refusal to eat bread. The abomination here was that bread was a staple of Greek diet and even played a role in Greek religious celebrations.\textsuperscript{97} (It is important to note that Xenophon did work as a mercenary for the barbarian Cyrus the Younger and exempted the Persian from the common barbarian stereotype. As we shall see with Herodotus, not all barbarians were created equal.) When the Romans found themselves to be the dominant imperial hegemony, they perpetuated the same non-Greek prejudices, and undoubtedly worried they would become the target of the hatred—seeing as they themselves should have been classified under these non-Greek stereotypes.\textsuperscript{98}

We conclude our examination with a consideration of the barbarians of Herodotus. Herodotus has often been portrayed as a dualist figure himself; at times he is lauded as the father of history, and at other times scrutinized and ridiculed as the father of lies.\textsuperscript{99} He is both a Greek and in some aspects, a non-Greek. He is a historian of Greek history, and a historian

\textsuperscript{94} Hippokrates of Kos (460-370 BCE) was an outstanding figure in the history of medicine. Using the popular Pythagorean theories of the 5\textsuperscript{th} Century, he separated the disciplines of medicine and philosophy and explained that illnesses were not a curse from the gods, but rather from the combination of diet, living habits and environmental features.

\textsuperscript{95} Hippokrates’ \textit{On Airs Waters Places} part of Hippokrates’ \textit{Hippocratic Corpus}, a collection of more than 70 documents on his teachings on various matters. \textit{Airs Waters Places} describes, in part, the environments effect on the people living in it.

\textsuperscript{96} Anabasis is Greek for “going up”, the march up country against Artaxerxes

\textsuperscript{97} Eleusian Mysteries are a celebration of Demeter, and the harvest of wheat

\textsuperscript{98} Cartledge

\textsuperscript{99} Francois Hartog, \textit{The Mirror of Herodotus: The Representation of the Other in the Writing of History} (London: University of California Press Ltd, 1988)
of the Other. His barbarians are a complex lot and at times their characteristics mimic the pervasive Greek ethnographical thought and stereotypes established above. However, Herodotus also uses his excurses (the logoi of ‘others’) to undercut\(^{100}\) the barbarian prejudices of Classical Greece and to comment on what it meant to be Greek.

\[\text{A Rhetoric of Wonders, Barbarians in Herodotus}\]

Herodotus’ biography is suggestive of the reasons for his inquiries into the Other. His birthplace of Halikarnassos, now modern day Bodrum in Turkey, was located in the Persian satrapy of Lydia in a region known as Caria. His lineage suggests that his ancestors were Carian, a people who did not speak Greek. In this sense, Herodotus was a descendant of the very Other he represents.\(^{101}\) He also led a migratory life which transcended geographical boundaries, which ended either in the panhellenic colony of Thurii in southern Italy, or perhaps in Pella in Macedonia. With his biography in mind, we can begin our investigation into why Herodotus presented his barbarians in a different manner than his contemporaries and predecessors.

Why is it that Herodotus includes these excurses of barbarian logoi? The first four books of the \textit{Histories} are accounts chiefly concerned with the Other: Lydians, Persians, Babylonians, Massagetae, Egyptians, Scythians and Libyans. These are the main barbarian nations covered by Herodotus. In fact they heavily predominate in his account of the Graeco-

\(^{100}\) Flower, 275.
\(^{101}\) Cartledge, 53.
Persian conflict: all of Book 2 is dedicated to the *Aigyptios logos*¹⁰² and three quarters of Book 4 expounds on the Scythian *logoi*. The primary reason why Herodotus chooses to include the barbarian *logoi* is to examine the Self through ‘reversed world othering.’¹⁰³ This process of ‘reversed world othering’ was a Greek intellectual inheritance, which had previously been used for Greek self-identification, yet never before on the same scale as Herodotus’ undertaking. Polarity, as we have seen, was an integral part of the summation of the Greek self. Greeks knew what they were *not* because of binary theories like those demonstrated by Pythagorean principles¹⁰⁴ of opposition: those in motion were not at rest, men were not women, the free were not slaves, and the Greek were not non-Greek. However, these calculations do not tell the Greeks who they actually were. In simplest terms, one cannot fully define what A is, by saying that it is not B. It is Herodotus, then, who put this inquiry into a new context and provided a language to define who the Greeks were, instead of the ambiguous classification of who they were not. We will use Hartog’s work, *The Mirror of Herodotus*, to understand how Herodotus achieved this.

Hartog begins his own inquiries with the aim of discovering how Classical Greeks viewed the non-Greeks surrounding them. He sought to “reveal the way or ways in which the Greeks practiced ethnology: in short, to sketch a history of ‘otherness’ with its own particular rhythms, emphases and discontinuities, always assuming these to be detectable.”¹⁰⁵ In his search he finds Herodotus to be the means for answering this question and he used a metaphor of a mirror to explain the representation of the Other.

¹⁰² Egyptian stories.
¹⁰³ Hartog, 18.
¹⁰⁴ Cartledge, 14.
¹⁰⁵ Hartog, 18.
Hartog’s theory helps us to understand the conflicting depictions of Herodotus that have been painted over time: the “father of history” (Cicero) versus the “father of lies” (Plutarch). His main narrative of the Persian Wars in the *Histories* seems historically accurate backed up by many other sources from antiquity. Even though his rhetorical dialogues are obviously fabricated (how would Herodotus know what was said in a Persian court?\(^\text{106}\)) the bare bones of his account of the Greek-Persian conflict are sturdy enough. It is the *logoi* of his ‘others’ which have perplexed and divided scholarship over the twenty-five centuries since Herodotus. Although Herodotus insists on his use of autopsy (*opsis*), especially in his stories of Egypt, he also relies on hearsay and his own opinions deduced from often insubstantial data. Thus, Herodotus has been split into two, rendered by scholars as both a father of history and one of lies. Is he a historian of traveler’s tales\(^\text{107}\) or is he a historian by the modern sense of the word? Or is he some combination and meshing of the two? We are primarily concerned with Herodotus the traveler, the Herodotus who some have relegated to be the father of ‘all liars’, or more importantly—the Herodotus who is the historian of Others. (The two tend to go hand in hand, as Herodotus’ tales of ‘elsewhere’ are the most fantastical and perplexing\(^\text{108}\), and were thus frequently reduced to lies in antiquity and onwards.) Hartog’s mirror metaphor is used in the second sense as a mirror held up by Herodotus to his ‘addressees’, the collection of Greeks he was writing for in the 5\(^{\text{th}}\) century.

\(^{106}\) Herodotus wrote many of the dialogues between Xerxes and his advisors as though they were philosophizing Greeks. He did not know, for example, what was said between Xerxes, Mardonius, and Artabanus when they were debating on whether or not to invade Greece. Herodotus, 7.8.

\(^{107}\) Hartog, 212.

\(^{108}\) Herodotus describes seeing skeletons of winged snakes on his journey to Egypt, as well as ants which chase down and kill camels.
Hartog says, that since mirrors reflect back in reverse, this collection of logoi of Others allows a composite history of Greek history itself.

Herodotus has taken pains to translate these Others to his narrative audience through a “rhetoric of otherness.” If ‘B’ represents all the habits and traits of Others in Herodotus, how would Herodotus go about explaining B to A (the Greeks)? It would be impossible for Herodotus to describe B by saying it is not A; this could not possibly have clarified the wonders of Egypt or the nomadic customs of Scythians to the Greeks. He had to describe B by saying it is the inverse of A, and this is exactly what Hartog explains Herodotus does. Herodotus uses the translation tool of the ‘inverse’ to explain his Barbarians to his Greek audience. He states what the wonder is, and then he inversely compares it to the Greek version. The ‘difference’ becomes ‘antisameness’ and now exists in the same field of comprehension: a single system of the Greek moral universe. The use of translating via the inverse was used frequently in travelers’ tales and utopic stories. It allows the person recounting the other world to place it into terms of the world in which the story is being recounted. Before Herodotus, the polarity which had been established in Greece between the Barbarians and themselves had not been able to be put into a language which could allow the Greeks to reflect inwards in such depth.

Herodotus’ methodology of the Other is paraded at exceptional length in the two greatest barbarian excurses, the Egyptian logos and the Scythian logos. Egypt was a place of many wonders for Herodotus. He uses the principle of inversion to explain everything from

---

109 Hartog, 215.
110 Hartog, 213.
urination polarities—Egyptian women urinate standing, while the men sit, which is the inverse of Greek practice, to the irrigation of Egyptian soil by the Nile, as the inverse to rainfall in Greece. “For when they heard that all the land of the Hellenes is watered by rain and not by rivers, they said that someday the Hellenes would be disappointed in their hopes for rain and would suffer a miserable starvation.”111 The inverse translation method appears at times phrased in the following manner: “Elsewhere, priests of the gods wear their hair long, but in Egypt they shave their heads. And although the rest of the human race expresses mourning, especially those closest to the deceased, by cutting their hair at once, Egyptians allow their shaved hair to grow both on the head and the chin just after a death.”112 The phrase “rest of the human race” is used as “a way for the narrative to mask the procedure of inversion” and use the universality “to obliterate the trademark of we the Greeks.”113 The Greeks were endlessly fascinated with the Egyptians, so it was probably not too much of a stretch for them to see themselves in this inverse relation to the particular Other. The Scythians, on the other hand, represented the most extreme polarized form of the non-Greek. The Scythians were a people of the far north who were ‘non-agricultural, non-urban, uncivilized, nomadic;’114 they were responsible for routing the army of Darius. The Scythians, although depicted as non-Greek, were still capable of the same accomplishment the Greeks were (in terms of Xerxes’ invasion) and so the Scythians in that respect can inform the Greek portrait of themselves as a people. The Scythians may not have been established in any political or economical sense, but their freedom echoed that of the Greeks. The Scythian logos of the Histories is not seeking to reveal a “real” Scythian people, but

111 Herodotus, 2.13.
112 Herodotus, 2.36.
113 Hartog, 213.
114 Cartledge, 71.
seeks to inform the overall narrative. If one is to read the Scythian logos and seek to verify it using Scythian archaeological evidence, one misses out on the Scythians of Herodotus. Hartog gives the example of the burial rites of the Kourganes, a Scythian royal people whom the archaeological records have found to be buried all over Scythia. Herodotus, however, wrote that this was only practiced in the far north. “Then these people take the king’s corpse in the wagon to another people under Scythian rule, in whose territory the royal graves are located. When the corpse has made its rounds to all of them, it comes to the Gerroi, who dwell at the farthest boundary of the peoples under Scythian rule, in whose territory the royal graves are located.” At first this appears as an inconsequential error on Herodotus’ part, but in fact it clearly is included to fit into the narrative mould of Hellenocentric ethnographic mapping. The Gerroi, who performed the savage sacrifices to the king, lived in the very outer fringes of Scythia, thus conforming to Herodotus’ observations that the strangest savagery occurs the furthest from Greece. In fact, it is quite possible that Darius never even attempted to conquer the Scythians and that Herodotus has included these stories within the Scythian logos only to shore up his core narrative and provide a point of unity between the Scythians and the Greeks.

We have seen how Herodotus brings his barbarian Others into the Greek moral universe and for what purpose he does so. The barbarians ‘in the Histories, are pieces on Herodotus’ chessboard that he moves according to the rules, but the resulting game is Herodotus’ own.” The Scythians and the Egyptians of Herodotus are included for specific reasons and not just to paint an appealing (and often times creative) portrait of peoples who

---

115 Herodotus, 4.71.
116 Heleen Sancisi-Weerdenburg “The Personality of Xerxes, King of kings” In Brill’s Companion to Herodotus (Leiden, the Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill), 582.
just happened to be existing during the time of his main narrative. The Hellenocentric bias of the time did surely pervade his writings and investigations, but scholars have given Herodotus much credit in his attempt at impartiality and ‘intellectual generosity’\textsuperscript{117}, especially in regards to arguably the most important barbarian of the \textit{Histories}: Xerxes, the Great King of Persia.

\textit{Polarity in Xerxes}

The historical portrait of Xerxes appears to be very complete and well-established. The sanctity of the intellectual tradition stemming from the ancient Greece has elevated the Greek depiction of Xerxes to an almost indisputable level of ‘fact’. Largely neglecting that Xerxes’ portrait is mostly a compilation of Greek sources with heavy Hellnocentric bias, we assume we are well-acquainted with the ancient Near Eastern monarch. The Greek reports of Xerxes are often examined as though they are documents unearthed from the ruins of Persepolis, as opposed to the literary compositions from a people who not only had a rivalry with the Persian empire but also had little to no understanding of the inner workings of its state, its religious and cultural rituals, and its distant rulers. The ancient Greek biography of Xerxes includes womanising, religious intolerance, being the weak successor to his accomplished father’s throne, and a failed monarch whose hubris lost him dominance over the West. As Achaemenid scholar Heleen Sancisi-Weerdenburg says, “There seems to be almost general agreement as to history’s verdict on Xerxes: a second rate personality and not really worthy of the throne of his father.”\textsuperscript{118} Of all these sources, there is one which is the

\textsuperscript{117} Momigliano (1979). Sancisi-Weerdenburg, 583.
\textsuperscript{118} Sancisi-Weerdenburg, 580.
most important when considering Xerxes’ biography: books 7 to 9 of the *Histories* are the go-to source for questions regarding the Great King.

What we find in Herodotus’ depiction of Xerxes is that it is consistent with his tendency to construct his barbarian characters to fit into the mould of his narrative. In the past, historians have treated the *Histories* (as a literary source) as primary evidence and have regarded the Persian primary archaeological evidence as secondary only to sustain Herodotus. As demonstrated by the use of Scythian archaeological evidence to shore up Herodotus’ Scythian *logos*, we can see that this is a precarious route to undergo in regards to the corroboration of Herodotus. Weerdenburg cites the example of Xerxes building projects as evidence of the secondary nature Persian archaeology plays in the creation of the Xerxes model. “If we know from a (clearly novelistic) tale in the *Histories* that Xerxes had a love [...] this ‘fact’ can be used to interpret Xerxes’ building policy which leads to the ‘conclusion’ that is understandable that the ‘Harem’ building was Xerxes’ most impressive building.”119 A fundamental requirement of history is that the individual sources be weighed according to their cultural merit. In this case, why is it that the Persian footprint is used to shore up the Greek statement? Archaeologists and scholars do not even fully comprehend what the ‘Harem’ building was actually used for. Christening it as a harem is in itself a demonstration of a Eurocentric stereotype of ancient Near Eastern monarchies. Whatever the case of the ‘Harem’ building, it is clear that Herodotus and archaeological evidence cannot rely on one another too heavily for Persian portraiture. The sources of Herodotus make it even less likely that the Greek picture is in accordance with the actual Persian king. As considered earlier, Herodotus having known the details of what was said between Xerxes and

119 Sancisi-Weerdenburg, 582.
his advisors is impossible. Perhaps eyewitness accounts had been passed down through the fifty years between the Persian Wars and the *Histories*, but it is likely they were altered in significant ways—if the conversations even occurred in the first place. For example, after the loss of the Persian ships at Cape Sepias, Xerxes and his brother Achaimenes debated over what they should do next.\(^{120}\) Herodotus probably (and possibly correctly) deduces that this sort of conversation must have happened after the 400 ships were destroyed and after Thermopylae had been won. A conversation of ‘what happens next’ would make sense logically as a natural progression; however, that would be the extent of what he could reasonably infer. Xerxes and Achaimenes speak as though they are Greeks philosophizing, which is yet another indication that Herodotus is placing the Persians into the Greek moral universe. (The paramount example of this is the debate on the best form of government between the seven Persians in Book 3.\(^{121}\) ) Herodotus’ portrait of Xerxes is ‘persuasive and beautifully elaborated’\(^{122}\) but the overall objectives of Herodotus’ narrative should not be mistaken as the real historical Persian king. With that said, who is the Xerxes we encounter in the *Histories*, and what is Herodotus using him for in regards to his overall narrative?

The Xerxes handed down in the Western tradition portrays Xerxes as a weak, indolent sovereign ruled by his passions and easily influenced by his advisors. This is a fair and accurate opinion in part. Scholarly and popular traditions consistently cite the infamous passage of Xerxes and his order ‘that the Hellespont was to receive 300 lashes under the whip, and that a pair of shackles was to be dropped into the sea.’\(^{123}\) Estimations about what

\(^{120}\) Herodotus, 7.236.
\(^{121}\) Herodotus, 3.80.
\(^{122}\) Sancisi-Weerdenburg, 582.
\(^{123}\) Herodotus, 7.35.
this could have meant in “real” Persian ritual aside, it is clear that the Xerxes of Herodotus is a portrait of a brutish, rash despot. There are too many instances of this type of behaviour on Xerxes’ part in the Histories for it to be pushed aside altogether in favour of the more tragic portrait of Xerxes in Aeschylus, which is also to be found in Herodotus (to be examined later.) The main reason for Xerxes’ depraved portrait is his penchant for transgressing boundaries and cultural norms which provide evidence for Herodotus’ main objective in proving that Pindar was right when he announced nomos basileus panton that ‘custom is king of all’. So for instance, in the account of the Hellespont shackling, Xerxes not only throws a despotic tantrum but we are made aware that he also breaks a Persian custom ‘to treat rivers with the utmost veneration.’ The Persians, Herodotus informed us in book 1, do not urinate, spit, or wash their hands in rivers—whipping and shackling then would obviously be taboo.

In Book 1, Herodotus writes that he has “acquired knowledge about the customs” of the Persians and lists what he has learned through his various sources. Herodotus holds the Persians in significantly high esteem and even singles out some of their nomoi for praise. It is these same high standards of customs which Xerxes continuously fails to live up to. Herodotus lauds the fact that “the King himself does not have anyone killed for a single offense, nor do any of the Persians inflict irremediable harm on any of their household slaves for a single offense. But if, when they add up the wrongdoings and find that they outnumber and outweigh the good services rendered, then they act on their anger.” In the final story of

---

124 Heleen Sancisi-Weerdenburg notes that Greeks knew too little about Persian religions and rituals to assign this act specifically to the hubris of Xerxes.
125 Herodotus, 1.138.
126 Herodotus, 1.137.
Xerxes, the Persian king falls in love with the wife of his brother Masistes but decides to end his attempts to seduce her ‘out of respect’\textsuperscript{127} to him. Xerxes instead pursues the daughter of Masistes and his wife, whom he had secured in marriage to his own son, Darius. When Xerxes is finished pursuing Masistes’ daughter (due to his own wife’s suspicions and her subsequent request to have the wife given to her for mutilation), he once again asks Masistes to give to him the wife. Xerxes finishes his speech to Masistes saying that he is ‘a good man.’\textsuperscript{128} However the admiration for his brother ends when he is refused, and Xerxes swiftly sends an army to kill Masistes, his sons, and his entourage. Xerxes’ murder of his brother and family clearly transgresses this Persian custom since the single wrongdoing of Masistes (his refusal to surrender his wife to Xerxes) hardly outweighs the good of Masistes’ many years of loyal service. In another episode, Xerxes’ brings ‘irremediable harm’ to a slave of his household\textsuperscript{129}, the Lydian Pythios. Pythios had given great wealth and hospitality to both Xerxes and his father and delights Xerxes so much that he was declared to be a ‘guest-friend’ of the Persians. Pythios takes up the march with Xerxes, but incurs the King’s wrath with the request that his eldest son be spared conscription to the Persian forces. Xerxes was so instantaneously enraged by this request that he “immediately ordered his men assigned to such tasks to find the eldest son of Pythios, cut him in two, and place on half of the body on the right side of the road and the other half on the left so that the army would march between them.”\textsuperscript{130} Xerxes mistreatment of Leonidas’ corpse is another example of his transgression of Persian norms. Herodotus writes that “the Persians especially honour men who are good at

\textsuperscript{127} Herodotus, 9.108.
\textsuperscript{128} Herodotus, 9.111.
\textsuperscript{129} Herodotus, 7.39.
\textsuperscript{130} Herodotus, 7.39.
waging war”\textsuperscript{131} and yet Xerxes picks Leonidas’ corpse out of the Thermopylae dead (the 300 Spartans who were acknowledged to be the best at warfare) and orders his head be cut off and impaled on a stake.\textsuperscript{132} Another didactic motif of Herodotus is the ideology that monarchy leads to an abuse of power which always ends in despotism. Although the majority of the Persian narrative is built around their contrast to freedom loving Greeks, Xerxes is Herodotus main model for the elaboration of this motif.

Xerxes’ religious intolerance is another staple of his portrayal in Herodotus. The Persian kings who came before Xerxes were also guilty of sacrilege against other cultures’ religious beliefs, but emphasis is placed the heaviest on Xerxes’ crimes. Cambyses commits a series of mad intolerant acts in Egypt, beginning with his inspection of ancient graves. He then continued on “to the sanctuary of Hephaistos and subjected its cult statue to mockery and derision” and later mocked and burned the statues in the sanctuary of Kabeiroi. Cambyses, however, is then absolved of these transgressions\textsuperscript{133} with a speech after his realization that he has killed his own brother. He weeps “over everything that had happened to him”\textsuperscript{134} and dies. The mourning of the Persians, in the customary form of their tearing of their clothes, shows that Cambyses, after all his madness, died with some amount of glory. The differences between Darius’ and Xerxes’ religious policies are best represented in the Babylonian logos. In the sanctuary of Zeus Belos, Herodotus tells us, a statue to the god Bel-Marduk stood eighteen feet high and was constructed of solid gold. “Darius son of Hystaspes had designs on this statue but did not dare remove it; Xerxes son of Darius, however, did take

\textsuperscript{131} Herodotus, 7.238.
\textsuperscript{132} Herodotus, 7.238.
\textsuperscript{134} Herodotus, 3.65.
it and killed the priest who was trying to forbid him to disturb the sacred image.”  

Years before Xerxes’ suppression of the revolts, Darius and Cyrus had gone to the ancient city. Cyrus, who is often portrayed as a “culture hero” to the Persians, had even allowed the walls and gates of Babylon to remain standing. Darius, although significantly more harsh in his treatment of the Babylonians (he put to death 3000 of the top officials), allows the citizens to regain control of their city and imports wives for all the Babylonians; they had killed their own in an effort to conserve grain supplies. Xerxes’ crimes against religion reach their climax in Athens when the Persians finally breach the Acropolis murder the suppliant within, plunder the temples, and ‘set the whole Acropolis on fire.’

The comparison between Xerxes and his father plays a large part in Herodotus’ portrait. In Aeschylus’ Persians, Darius is the great father who encapsulated the spirit of Persian glory; a King who never deceived his people or let down his empire. The dichotomy between the father and son in the play is extremely clear, with Xerxes coming off as an effeminate, hubristic failure in comparison. There is less of this gap between the two in Herodotus, although it still exists in part. Darius is obviously a born leader, capable of making decisions on his own and convincing others to follow in his directions. When Cambyses’ brother, Smerdis, is revealed to actually be the Magus, Otanes calls upon the help of other esteemed Persians to help conspire against the imposter. Darius, even though he is the last to arrive, takes charge demanding that the conspirators ‘act immediately without delay.’ His plan concerns Otanes, and yet Darius wins them over to his side after one

---

135 Herodotus, 1.183.
136 Flower, 282.
137 Herodotus, 8.54.
138 Herodotus, 3.71.
speech. On the other hand, a large section of the beginning of Book 7 is spent having to persuade Xerxes to instigate his campaigns against Egypt and Greece. He is easily led astray, as his uncle Artabanus tells him, by his “associations with evil people”\(^\text{139}\) who are often out to increase their own fortunes. Before his campaign to Greece, Xerxes is pressured by his cousin Mardonius (‘who wanted to become governor of Hellas himself’ \(^\text{140}\)), the kings of Thessaly, the Peisistratids, and a flurry of oracles from Athens—all of whom seek to use the power and might of Persia for accomplishing their own ends. When Xerxes finally is persuaded to embark on these campaigns, he treats the inhabitants of his subject states with a lot more cruelty than his father. Just as in Babylon, when Xerxes finally is convinced to “muster an army against Egypt”\(^\text{141}\), he “impose[s] a more oppressive slavery upon Egypt than had been enforced during the reign of Darius.”\(^\text{142}\) There are however other ways to interpret this relationship of father and son in the *Histories* which belongs to a different reading of the characteristics of Xerxes.

Heleen Sancisi-Weerdenburg is a proponent of a different analysis of Herodotus’ Xerxes which suggests that he is less the weak, hubristic monarchical monster that centuries of scholarship have understood him to be, and more a “tragic [man] unable to escape fate.”\(^\text{143}\) There is no denying that Xerxes is less a man than his father, but Darius is not the epitomic king of the Persian empire as he had been portrayed in Aeschylus. Darius’ foibles all foreshadow the mistakes of his son: Darius’ transgressed natural boundaries by bridging the

---

\(^\text{139}\) Herodotus, 7.16.
\(^\text{140}\) Herodotus, 7.6.
\(^\text{141}\) Herodotus, 7.5.
\(^\text{142}\) Herodotus, 7.8.
\(^\text{143}\) Sancisi-Weerdenburg, 588.
Bosporus and setting into Europe\textsuperscript{144} to subject the Scythians; he also failed to march on Greece and lost countless Persians at the Battle of Marathon before Xerxes’ attempt, and he committed numerous acts of tyrannical aggression. Forshadowing Xerxes’ despotic cruelty to the Lydian Pythios, Darius had the sons of Oibazos executed (by the slitting of their throats) upon the father’s request that one of his sons be spared from the military campaign into Scythia.\textsuperscript{145} Darius also ignores the famed Persian \textit{nomos} of the sanctity of the truth. Herodotus states: “They consider telling lies more disgraceful than anything else, and, next to that, owing money.”\textsuperscript{146} Darius says to Otanes and the other Persians, that a lie is equal to the truth if they are both constructed to gain the same in the end.\textsuperscript{147}

Women and their relationships with Xerxes also have polarized scholarly views. The tales of boudoir intrigue at the Persian court have played a large part in painting Xerxes as a sensual man controlled by his passions and women. When Xerxes returned to Asia, he gave himself over to hedonism—he concentrated solely on building spectacular projects and womanising, instead of tending to the affairs of the Empire. Yet these lurid ‘short stories’\textsuperscript{148} are rooted in popular narrative traditions and share elements with many other stories of their kind. Xerxes’ love for his niece Artaynte condemned him as a monarch who abused his power for his own pleasures, but how is this different than the hundreds of monarchs to come after him in both Western and Near Eastern history? There are still monarchs in modern society who use their elevated statuses to seduce women, and one cannot read a history of the Tudors of England without repeatedly stumbling upon this behaviour. Rather, Xerxes is a

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{144} Herodotus, 4.87.
\textsuperscript{145} Herodotus, 4.84.
\textsuperscript{146} Herodotus, 1.139.
\textsuperscript{147} Herodotus, 3.72.
\textsuperscript{148} Sancisi-Weerdenburg, 585.
\end{flushleft}
man “caught in a tragic entanglement between the prescriptions of his office, the law that the king should give whatever he is asked for, and the partly unforeseen consequences of the fulfilment of this rule.”\textsuperscript{149} Xerxes promised Artaynte anything she wanted, and when she asked for the robe in which he was desperate not to give away, he still kept his word in the end and gave it to her. Sancisi-Weerdenburg concludes that there is “no element in the story which warrants a judgment of the king as an abuser of royal power to seduce women.”\textsuperscript{150}

Xerxes is a far more complex individual in the \textit{Histories} than some credit him as being. Xerxes’ laughter and weeping, occurring during ‘sub-historical non-events,’\textsuperscript{151} are used to enhance dramatic tension between his character’s helpless inaction in the face of the fated events of history. His desire to gaze at his colossal army and his simultaneous request to watch a rowing match often lead some to suggest the passage to be as a sign of his hubris; but Xerxes wept while surveying his army at Abydos because he was overcome with pity as he ‘considered the brevity of human life.’\textsuperscript{152} He recognized that not one of his massive assembled army would still be alive in a hundred years time. It is truly a tragic moment because knowing how events would come to pass, Herodotus’ addressee would recognize that most of Xerxes’ army would not even be alive by the end of the war. Xerxes tried and failed to continue the Persian \textit{nomos} of imperialist expansion, he listened to too many bad advisors, and his religious fanaticism led him to trust in the powers of the divine too heavily.

\textsuperscript{149} Sancisi-Weerdenburg, 586.  
\textsuperscript{150} Sancisi-Weerdenburg, 586.  
\textsuperscript{151} Lateiner, 175.  
\textsuperscript{152} Herodotus, 7.46.
The polarity of Herodotus’ Xerxes will continue to split scholarship, but it is clear that the Xerxes who pines for the lives of his army at Abydos is not a wholly unsympathetic character.

_A Summary of Xerxes in Herodotus_

It would seem that Herodotus has crafted a dual portrait of the Persian king. We have seen that the Xerxes in Herodotus can simultaneously be read as a rash despot and a tragic barbarian. The citation of despotic moments out of context, however, leads to an unfair depiction of the king. For example, the image of the lashing and fettering of the Hellespont when, taken alone, portrays Xerxes as nothing more than a rash and brutish tyrant. However, this image should be weighed against the account of Xerxes’ possible apology to the Hellespont, which occurs the following day: “His prayer ended, he flung the cup into the Hellespont and with it a golden bowl and a Persian acinaces. I cannot say for certain if he intended the things to be an offering to the Sun-god; perhaps they were—or it may be that they were a gift to the Hellespont itself, to show he was sorry for having caused it to be lashed with whips.”153 As we have seen, scholars have given more weight—unfairly, I would argue—to despotic moments like the punishment of the Hellespont in assessing the overall portrait of Xerxes. There are instances of cruel, repressive despotism but these are contained within the overall portrayal of the king as a hopeless and tragic figure. As we shall see, when Herodotus introduces us to Xerxes in Book 7, he clearly sets Xerxes up as a tragic figure. The tragedy of Xerxes which then unfolds is that of a good man corrupted by his inheritance of the Persian _nomos_ of imperialism.

---

153 Herodotus, 7.54.
Xerxes’ succession to the Persian throne was a matter of great debate. Darius had three sons before he was named king, and four more after his accession. “The eldest of the first three was Artanazanes, and of the last four Xerxes.”\(^{154}\) Herodotus explains here that the “universal custom” in Persia is that the eldest should be given the throne. Xerxes, however, is rewarded with the throne due to the arguments of Demaratus (the deposed Spartan king) and perhaps his mother Atossa, whom Herodotus tells us has immense power at court.\(^ {155}\) This sets up the continuing theme that Xerxes’ fate is continuously played out in the hands of others. Even from the beginning, Xerxes appears not to be in control of his life and destiny.

Xerxes “at first was not at all interested in invading Greece”\(^ {156}\) and it is apparent that, according to Herodotus, it took many people and extraordinary circumstances to convince him to attack. Xerxes’ decision to cross the Hellespont was almost entirely out of his control. Mardonius urges for the campaign to commence because he loves mischief, adventure, and seeks to become the governor of Greece.\(^ {157}\) He likens Xerxes to an immortal, telling him that Europe’s beauty is not good enough “for any mortal except the Persian king.”\(^ {158}\) Therefore, Xerxes’ vision of himself as divine is not his own fault. It has been falsely created by those closest to him, especially Mardonius. The messengers from the Aleuadae in Thessaly and the Pisistratidae also work fervently at convincing Xerxes to take up arms against Greece. The Pisistratidae use the oracle collector, Onomacritus, to convince Xerxes that his campaign would be successful. It is through trickery that Xerxes is continuously duped into believing

\(^{154}\) Herodotus, 7.2.  
\(^{155}\) Herodotus, 7.3.  
\(^{156}\) Herodotus, 7.5.  
\(^{157}\) Herodotus, 7.5.  
\(^{158}\) Herodotus, 7.6.
his campaign is blessed by the gods: “Any prophecy which implied a setback to the Persian cause [Onomacritus] would carefully omit, choosing for quotation only those which promised the brightest triumphs, describing to Xerxes how it was fore-ordained that the Hellespont should be bridge by a Persian.”159

After listening to such arguments and fabricated oracles, Xerxes holds a debate in which Mardonius and Artabanus present opposing sides on whether war should be waged against Greece. The debate is phrased in terms of Greek rhetoric and hardly depicts a brutish king seeking aggressive revenge; rather, it suggests that Xerxes is taking the time to consider the best course of action for Persia. This debate describes the impossible situation Xerxes is in. Xerxes knows that Persian custom “ever since Cyrus desposed Astyages”160 has been never to remain inactive and he believes that it has been “God’s guidance”161 which has allowed the Persian empire to exist in a state of great prosperity. In addition to the ancestral Persian nomos of imperialism, Mardonius deludes Xerxes again into believing that out of “all who are yet to be born”162 Xerxes is the greatest. He is giving Xerxes a ‘god complex’ and pushing him into a war for which he did not initially care. Artabanus’ speech conveys Herodotus’ narrative message that it is “God’s way to bring the lofty low.”163 The application of this moral to Xerxes’ plight is what makes him more of a tragic figure than a despotic one. Xerxes has been convinced that it is God’s will that he take Greece into Persia’s empire, but in actuality the opposite is true and Artabanus is right. Artabanus argues that “amongst living creatures it is the great ones that God smites with his thunder” and that “it is always the great

---

159 Herodotus, 7.6.
160 Herodotus, 7.8a.
161 Herodotus, 7.8a.
162 Herodotus, 7.9.
163 Herodotus, 7.10e.
buildings and the tall trees which are struck by lightning.”\(^{164}\) But his arguments fall upon deaf ears for the time being and Xerxes decides that there is no other choice but to invade Greece.

In the evening following the debate, Xerxes “began to be worried by what Artabanus had said, and during the night, as he turned it over in his mind, he came to the conclusion that the invasion of Greece would not, after all, be a good thing.”\(^{165}\) We see again that Xerxes is pondering whether war is inevitable and is not anxious to rush into battle. Even after all the convincing by Mardonius, the Aleuadae, the Pisistratidaes and their false oracles, Xerxes still fears what Artabanus (here acting as the mouthpiece of Herodotus) has warned about “how wrong it is to teach the heart to always seek more.”\(^{166}\) After Xerxes reneges on his decision to invade Greece, he is visited by phantoms in his sleep who threaten him into war with Greece. Following two visions, Xerxes forces Artabanus to sleep in his place and he too is visited by a frightening phantom. Artabanus, the war’s one opponent, finally concedes: “I know that God is at work in this matter; and since apparently heaven itself is about to send ruin upon Greece, I admit that I was mistaken.”\(^{167}\) After Xerxes’ series of dreams in the Histories, his fate is sealed and he is unable to prevent his doomed war because he believes it is sanctioned by divine forces and now even Artabanus’ voice of opposition has been silenced. The folly of Xerxes’ doomed war initiated by a ‘divine’ visitor in a dream mimics the folly of Agamemnon’s war against Troy in Homer’s Iliad. In Book 2, Agamemnon is visited by “evil

\(^{164}\) Herodotus, 7.10e.
\(^{165}\) Herodotus, 7.12.
\(^{166}\) Herodotus, 7.16a.
\(^{167}\) Herodotus, 7.18.
Dream”\textsuperscript{168} sent by Zeus in order to convince him to continue to wage war on Troy. As Agamemnon sleeps, Dream tells him that he “might take the wide-wayed city of the Trojans”\textsuperscript{169} and that “evils are in store for the Trojans.”\textsuperscript{170} Agamemnon awakens confident that on that very day “he would take Priam’s city.”\textsuperscript{171} Homer calls him foolish for thinking this for Agamemnon “knew nothing of all the things Zeus planned to accomplish, Zeus, who yet was minded to visit tears and sufferings on Trojans and Danaans alike.”\textsuperscript{172}

Xerxes, believing his war to be ordained by God, begins to act much more despotically from here on in the \textit{Histories}. He has a third dream in which he sees himself crowned with olive branches which “spread all over the earth.”\textsuperscript{173} Suddenly, however, the crown vanishes from his head. The Magi read this dream favourably for Persia, which is preposterous because it clearly suggests the ruin of Xerxes’ reign. A crown vanishing suddenly from the ruler’s head seems to depict the loss of an empire, rather than the gaining of another one. This misinterpretation of the dream is a sign that Xerxes is now blind to the idea that his war will not be a successful one.

The remainder of Herodotus’ account of Xerxes depicts a cruel despot. Following his decision to ignore his third dream, Xerxes digs a canal through Mount Athos, which Herodotus says he does to “show his power and to leave something to be remembered by” as there would have "been no difficulty at all in getting the ships hauled across the isthmus on

\textsuperscript{168} Homer 2.1-34, \textit{Iliad}. I have used the translation by Richmond Lattimore.
\textsuperscript{169} Homer, 2.12.
\textsuperscript{170} Homer, 2.32.
\textsuperscript{171} Homer, 2, 37.
\textsuperscript{172} Homer 2.38-39.
\textsuperscript{173} Herodotus, 7.19.
Shortly after this is Xerxes’ infamous whipping and fettering of the Hellespont, followed by his hubristic disregard for another bad omen where “the sky grew dark as night, though the weather was perfectly clear and cloudless,” despite which Xerxes continued to march his army forth in high spirits. The recurring obsession with numbers also begins here, while Xerxes surveys his army at Abydos. At Doriscus, in Thrace, he rides on horseback the full length of his army in order to admire it. After doing so, he boards a Sidonian vessel and under a canopy of gold he surveys the entire length of his navy. Xerxes is confident that the great size of his army and navy will prove to be the downfall of Greece. Xerxes believes that monarchy (autocratic rule) is the only way a group of men can come together united to face the task at hand. Therefore, the nature of the imperial Persian state gives Xerxes great confidence that one man ruling and leading thousands will prove to be superior to an amalgamation of a relatively few free men.

This inherited Persian nomos of autocracy increases Xerxes’ hubris. This nomos is established in Book 3 with the Persian constitutional debate. Darius argues that oligarchy leads to “violent personal feuds” and cycles back on itself in a return to monarchy, while democracy eventually becomes monarchy because “somebody or other comes forward as the people’s champion and breaks up the cliques” and is rewarded with absolute power. Demaratus tries to check Xerxes’ confidence in his autocracy by explaining that the Greeks

174 Herodotus, 7.24.  
175 Herodotus, 7.35.  
176 Herodotus, 7.37.  
177 Herodotus, 7.45.  
178 Herodotus, 3.79-83.  
179 Herodotus, 3.82.  
180 Herodotus, 3.82.
are slaves to Law, and that Law says that they will fight with valour until the death.\textsuperscript{181} But Xerxes cannot understand how their democratic freedoms, coupled with their comparatively small numbers, make them a strong opponent.

Xerxes’ hubris culminates in Book 9 with the final story of his brutish treatment of his brother Masistes. Xerxes is a tragic figure who has become corrupted by the ancestral Persian \textit{nomos} of imperialism (despotism) which consequently transformed him into the weak despotic ruler we encounter in Herodotus’ final narrative about the king. Upon Masistes’ refusal to give over his beloved wife to Xerxes, Xerxes explodes in hubristic violence: "‘Very well, then, I will tell you, Masistes, what you have done for yourself: I no longer offer you the chance of marrying my daughter—nor will you live another day with that wife of yours.’"\textsuperscript{182} Xerxes’ fratricide against Masistes, as well as, Masistes’ entire family indicates that Xerxes has reached the pinnacle of despotic tyranny.

Xerxes’ tragic fall from noble figure to brutish tyrant through the corruption of the imperial Persian \textit{nomos} is both like and unlike the tragedy of Xerxes in Aeschylus. The Xerxes of Herodotus is unlike the portrayal in Aeschylus because the tragedy of the Herodotean Xerxes is conceptualized through a ‘tragedy of succession.’\textsuperscript{183} In Aeschylus, however, the fault of the empire’s failure lies squarely on the shoulders of Xerxes. Both Herodotus’ Xerxes and Aeschylus’ Xerxes send a potent message of warning to the Athenians and their expanding imperial empire. The two portrayals of Xerxes would allow the Athenians to see themselves reflected in the king’s tragedy. The Athenians in 472 BCE,

\begin{footnotes}
\item[181] Herodotus, 7.104.
\item[182] Herodotus, 9.111.
\item[183] Rosenbloom, 112.
\end{footnotes}
at the time of Aeschylus’ *Persians*, were not as far along on their path to empire as the Athenians in the time of Herodotus’ narrative. Therefore, we can infer that Herodotus’ Xerxes sends greater caution to the Athenians.
Conclusion

As we have seen, there are many different portraits of Xerxes provided by a series of spatially and temporally disparate sources throughout history. Each source must be weighed for value according to the context and location in which it has originated in order to understand its particular rendering of the Persian king. A historically accurate portrait of Xerxes cannot come from the Graeco-Roman writers because their narratives are too wrought with the Hellenocentric bias which pervaded the fifth and later centuries BCE. Although the Graeco-Roman writers, Aeschylus and Herodotus included, have their merits in providing parts of a factual depiction of Xerxes, they must always come secondary to the sources from the Near East. Archaeological evidence from Persepolis and Susa, as well as the various trilingual inscriptions of the Persian empire, remain our best primary sources for constructing a portrait of Xerxes with historical veracity. Xerxes’ inscriptions allow insight into the values of the empire, his religious piousness, and his dedication to upholding the standards of his father. Persian primary sources may not portray a multifaceted Xerxes, yet his amalgamated portrait built out of ancient Persian administrative documents, sand-swept ruins, and cliff-faced inscriptions provide scholars with an account of the king which is empty of the biases and morals found in the versions from the Western tradition.

Aeschylus’ Xerxes in *Persians* is an important portrait of the king because it is the first depiction of the Persians as the Other placed within the Greek moral universe in order to elicit self-reflection on the part of the Greeks. A reading of the play’s text can simply convey the prejudices and barbarian stereotypes of the early 5th Century BCE, whereas the theatrical
performance of *Persians* can collapse the boundary between Self (Greek) and Other (barbarian) by making each more accessible to the other. Because of this, the hubris of Xerxes could have provided a warning to the play’s Athenian audience—who years later would suffer from a similar tragic result from their hubris and imperial expansion in attempting to dominate the other Greek city-states. Herodotus provides the same warning to the Athenians through the transformation of Xerxes from monarchic ruler into tyrannical despot. In essence, the tragedy of Xerxes is relatable because it is a hubristic transformation that can happen in any person, Greek or barbarian.

Herodotus undercuts the barbarian stereotype through his complex history of the Greeks told through the inverse tales of the Other. His *Histories* should never be reduced to a ‘banal exploratory formula,’ but there is no doubt that one of Herodotus’ main concerns was to relate all of humanity through the bonds of human suffering and the tragedy of Xerxes. Different cultures may follow different nomoi but they all face the brevity of human existence and they all suffer similar misfortunes along the way. Herodotus includes a story of a symposium held for Mardonius and fifty elite Persians in Thebes, in which a Theban and a Persian each sat side by side on a couch as they dined. A Persian man wept as he told the Greek next to him that in a short time only a few of the Persians would be alive. Xerxes wept for the same reasons at Abydos. Herodotus uses his *Histories* to humanize his barbarians. Though the Persians and Greeks are polar opposites of one another, they are still united by Herodotus’ concept of a universal humanity.

---

184 Flower, 279.
185 Herodotus, 9.16.


**Bibliography**

*Primary Sources*


*Secondary Sources*


