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2016

### Xerxes' Deliberate Expedition

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#### Recommended Citation

Knowlton, B. (2016). Xerxes' Deliberate Expedition. *The Journal of Classics Teaching* 17(34): 49-54.  
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S2058631016000246>

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A close-up photograph of a marble bust of Xerxes I, the Persian king who led the expedition against Greece in 480 BCE. The bust shows his head and right arm, with intricate details in the hair and musculature. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

# Xerxes' Deliberate Expedition

by B.C. Knowlton

Book Seven of Herodotus' *Histories* contains his account of the Persian expedition against Greece led by King Xerxes in 480 BCE. This campaign followed from the one undertaken ten years earlier on the orders of his father, King Darius. That Persian force had landed at Marathon and been defeated by the Athenians in a famous battle that has ever since been considered a victory of European freedom over Oriental despotism. Xerxes, determined to avenge his father's defeat, raised a force reported by Herodotus to be of as many as two and a half million fighting men, only to come up against the 300 Spartans at the Battle of Thermopylae. This narrative of these and the subsequent battles of Salamis and Plataea has been well known from its Herodotean source ever since; and the muscle-bound and blood-drenched deeds of the 300 have recently been made famous again by the movie of that name. The more recent sequel to *300* begins with a less accurate account of the Battle of Marathon; and, where the first movie ended with Plataea under way, *Rise of an Empire* ends with victory at Salamis all but won. Courses in Western or World History are likely to come upon the Persian Wars, and the recent popular movies might serve as an accessible and engaging introduction to these historical events and developments. But Herodotus' account of how Xerxes came to his decision to invade Greece, with its consideration of politics, rhetoric, and religion, is, if not as thrilling, at least as

telling. It tells the standard narrative of the conflict between East and West, and it tells of many ways in which the conflict was more complicated than that. It tells not just how the Greeks and Persians came to fight each other, but who the Greeks and Persians were that they might have fought, or not, but did.

Wherever it is possible to make use of a movie to introduce students to a bit of history, the risk, or even the temptation, will be to let the movie take the place of the text.<sup>1</sup> Students these days would rather see than read their history, and often they would rather their history was belligerent than deliberate. But for teachers who would stick to the text if not to the textbook, and who might prefer a less warlike focus, I propose to essay a close reading and detailed explication of the Persian deliberations as recounted in Herodotus' *Histories*. I will follow the narrative thread of the episode and pursue the thematic matters which, in a history class, could either lead to other readings or stand as characteristically Herodotean. Herodotus is, of course, a primary source for this history. This is not to say that his inquiries or researches (the standard translations of the Greek title) are strictly and straightforwardly *wie es eigentlich gewesen*. But the *Histories* is the best and often the only source we have for the Persian Wars, and it is historiographically significant even where it may not be historically accurate.

Darius had died while preparations were under way for his second attempt to

conquer Greece.<sup>2</sup> It would seem obvious that Xerxes would take up and carry on his father's campaign. *Rise of an Empire* treats all of this in an inaccurate and fantastical way.<sup>3</sup> According to Herodotus, however, initially it is not even obvious that Xerxes would be the one to succeed his father. Darius had an older son by an earlier wife, and he also had a claim to the throne. Xerxes was the eldest son of Darius' last wife, Atossa; and Herodotus thinks that in the end it was her influence that secured the throne for her son.<sup>4</sup> But he also tells us that it was at this moment that the deposed Spartan king Demaratus arrived at the Persian court, and furnished Xerxes with a Spartan argument for the superiority of his claim.

The question of succession had arisen because in the midst of the preparations for the invasion of Greece, there was a revolt in Egypt. Another punitive expedition was ordered up, and while Darius had apparently not planned to go to Greece himself, he does now plan to go to Egypt. Herodotus tells us that 'according to Persian law the king may not march with his army until he has named his successor' (7.2). This point of Persian law is of pertinent interest to us in that it raises the question of whether and to what extent a Persian king is bound to abide by Persian law or custom (the Greek word *nomos* translates both ways). The Persian monarchy is typically depicted as absolute, in contrast to the constitutional regimes of Greece (whether the constitution be democratic, as in Athens,

or aristocratic, as in Sparta). A Persian king, it is usually assumed, can do whatever he wants, and is not bound by any law.<sup>5</sup> As we will see, Persian kings do have to take into account Persian *nomoi*.

The question of succession having come up, Herodotus gives us a detailed account of its resolution. Darius' elder son, Artabazanes, argued that it was 'by universal custom' that he was 'entitled to inherit his father's position' (7.2). This anticipates the significance of the deliberation where it specifies *Persian* custom. And then of course his father's position is that of Persian *King*. Atossa, the mother of Xerxes, was 'the daughter of Cyrus, who won the Persians their freedom' (7.2). Darius had not been a son of Cyrus, but rather the leader of a group of Persian aristocrats who had overthrown a usurping successor.<sup>6</sup> He thereupon married the daughter of Cyrus, which had enhanced his legitimacy; and now for her son to succeed him is more in line with the dynasty. The significance of Cyrus having not simply been Persian King but having given the Persians their *freedom* complicates both the opposition between Persia and Greece and the definition of freedom usually assumed by readers. Cyrus had given the Persians freedom from the Medes, by whom they had been subjected.<sup>7</sup> From then on, the Medes were subject to the Persians. For the Greeks as well, freedom meant freedom from domination by anyone else. There was nothing contradictory about being free and having slaves. That Herodotus tells us what he thinks of 'the immense power of Atossa' (7.3) is a good example of the interest he takes in interesting women throughout the *Histories*.<sup>8</sup> Finally, the arrival and advice of Demaratus are noteworthy for at least a couple of reasons. His Spartan argument in favour of Xerxes' succession is that 'Darius was already on the throne of Persia when he was born, whereas Artabazanes was born before his father held any public office at all' (7.3). The *Spartan* custom was that 'if sons were born before the father came to the throne, and another was born afterwards when he was king, the latter should succeed him' (7.3). When this is put to Darius, he sees not the universality of the custom but 'the justice of the argument' (7.3).<sup>9</sup> That Demaratus was in attendance at the Persian court also serves to complicate the opposition between East and West which tends to

figure in this history, and to point to other episodes in the *Histories*.<sup>10</sup>

Xerxes was not at first as determined as his father had been to invade Greece; and not only because he had an Egyptian rebellion to contend with. That he *was* as determined as Darius had been to punish the Egyptians suggests that Xerxes wasn't simply disinclined to undertake a campaign. But he evidently needed to be convinced to undertake the campaign against the Greeks; and here his advisor Mardonius is like that servant of Darius who had been ordered to say to him each time he sat down to eat, 'Master, remember the Athenians' who several years earlier had supported a revolt of Ionian Greeks who were subject to the Persian King (5.105). "Master," Mardonius would say to Xerxes, "the Athenians have done us a great injury, and it is only right that they should be punished for their crimes" (7.5). On the other hand, Mardonius is *not* like that servant of Darius, for Darius had *ordered* him to do as he did, having already decided to attack Athens. Xerxes is at first actually 'not at all interested in invading Greece' (7.4), and Mardonius takes it on himself to nag him about it. There is a kind of politic logic to this part of Mardonius' argument, but another part strikes a decidedly false note: for 'to the argument for revenge he would add that Europe was a very beautiful place... too good for any mortal except the Persian king' (7.5). One of the most persistent themes of the *Histories* has to do with the contrast between European poverty and Oriental opulence.<sup>11</sup> Herodotus goes on to say here that 'Mardonius' motive for urging the campaign was love of mischief and adventure and the hope of becoming governor of Greece himself' (7.6). He urges Xerxes 'with much persistence' (7.6) to undertake the campaign, and his urgings are given an additional push by oligarchical exiles from Thessaly and Athens, as well as by a crooked utterer of oracles. Herodotus tells us that the arguments of Mardonius 'persuaded Xerxes to make the attempt' (7.6); but he adds that because of the oracular and oligarchical pressure, 'Xerxes gave in and allowed himself to be persuaded to undertake the invasion of Greece' (7.7). The ambivalence of the persuasiveness calls the rhetoric into question.

Those oligarchical exiles further complicate the simplistic picture of

heroic Greeks and villainous Persians that popular versions of this history give us. Demaratus is an oligarchical exile, but Sparta is determined to resist the Persian invasion – as Demaratus tells Xerxes, very frankly (7.101-104). The Aleuadae of Thessaly, however, are in Persia to negotiate the 'medising' of that region of Greece, which means their submission to Xerxes. The Greeks referred to the Persians as 'Medes', and many Greek cities did in fact side with the Persians in their invasion. The Pisistratidae were the successors of the Athenian tyrants Peisistratus and his son Hippias, who had ruled Athens prior to the establishment of democracy by Cleisthenes in 509 BCE.<sup>12</sup> Hippias was exiled from Athens and taken in by the Persians. He had accompanied the Persian force that landed at Marathon; had it defeated the Athenians, Hippias would have been installed as satrap in Attica. The presence of these Greek exiles at the Persian court reminds us that, on the one hand, there were Greek cities who stood up to the Persians, and others that gave in; and that on the other there were even within cities factions that were either for or against resistance to Xerxes.

That oracular character also warrants a close reading. He is 'an Athenian named Onomacritus, a collector of oracles, who had arranged and edited the oracles of Musaeus' (7.6). He had been banished from Athens for including in his collection oracles that he had forged, and he ended up in the entourage of the exiled oligarchs. Now he helps them persuade Xerxes to invade Greece. Evidently he collected oracles pertaining to the invasion; and whereas earlier he had added forged oracles to a collection of legitimate ones, now he subtracts those that predict defeat for the invasion. Oracles play a very important role in the *Histories*. Herodotus himself, in general, reflects the conventional piety of antiquity concerning the ways in which the gods determine the course of events, and communicate those determinations to humans. That the persuasion of Xerxes involves a corruption of the oracular order of things is significant.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, Herodotus does not let piety get in the way of inquiry. Here he acknowledges that there are oracles out there that predict both success and failure for Xerxes' expedition.

So Xerxes would seem to have been persuaded, by argument or otherwise, to undertake the invasion of Greece, the preparations for which would have gone ahead while Xerxes tended to the rebellion among the Egyptians. That rebellion was quickly crushed, and the Egyptians subjected more harshly than ever, so that there was nothing to distract or discourage Xerxes from going to Greece. But then Herodotus tells us that ‘when he was on the point of taking in hand the expedition against Athens, Xerxes called a conference of the leading men in the country, to find out their attitude towards the war and to explain to them his own wishes’ (7.8).

Xerxes opens the deliberations with a speech that lays out his view of the matter. ‘Do not suppose, men of Persia, that I am departing from precedent in the course of action I intend to undertake,’ he says (7.8a); and here one may wonder whether the course of action he refers to is the deliberation itself, which is a bit of a departure from precedent, or must have seemed so to men who are after all slaves of the Persian king and must do whatever he orders. But then Xerxes makes clear that the course of action he intends to undertake is the conquest of Greece, which would be entirely in line with the way the Persians have carried on. And indeed, in ordering the invasion of Greece, Xerxes invokes the *nomoi* of the Persians.<sup>14</sup> ‘We Persians have a way of living’ is the way he puts it; ‘which I have inherited from my predecessors and propose to follow’ (7.8a). Here one might wonder whether Xerxes is acknowledging that he is as subject to the *nomoi* of the Persians as any of his subjects; but then it becomes clear that ‘we Persians’ means ‘we Persian kings’. The Persian king’s word is law; and perhaps for that reason he has to abide by the laws the previous kings have laid down. Having invoked the *nomoi*, Xerxes appeals to history. Here the focus is not on his implication in it but his subjects’ knowledge of it. ‘Of our past history you need no reminder’ he tells his leading men (7.8a). If his own wishes can be associated with the *nomoi*, then his audience’s attitude toward the war can be associated with the history. To anyone with a knowledge of Herodotus, it will be obvious that while Cyrus and Darius can be said to have performed ‘famous deeds’ (7.8a), the deeds of Cambyses can only be called infamous.<sup>15</sup> And even Cyrus and

Darius performed less than famous deeds in their attempts to conquer the Massagetae and the Scythians.<sup>16</sup> The Persian version of history considers the deeds equally famous, because the doers of them were all kings. The conquests of his predecessors, Xerxes says, have made Persia powerful and prosperous; and now he is determined to carry on as they did, so as not to fall short of what they did. There is a kind of politic logic about this, too; but again the argument is undermined by misinformation. Xerxes has apparently been convinced by Mardonius that Greece is ‘a country as large and rich as our own – indeed richer than our own’ (7.8a). In other words, the *nomos* of conquest is clear enough; the history of Greece is wrong. However that may be, Xerxes is convinced; and so he now tells the leading men of Persia that the real purpose of the conference is not for them to deliberate about the invasion but for him to announce his decision.

‘I will bridge the Hellespont and march an army through Europe into Greece, and punish the Athenians for the outrage they committed upon my father and upon us’ Xerxes announces (7.8b). It is telling that the first thing he will do is bridge the Hellespont, a body of water not meant to be bridged. It tells the Herodotean audience that Xerxes exhibits *hubris*; and they will know what follows from that.<sup>17</sup> And indeed the first bridge he has built will soon be destroyed in a storm. Xerxes will have the bridge builders executed, and the Hellespont flogged; then he will order the bridge rebuilt (7.34–6). And then even as he announces that he will bridge the Hellespont, he has already begun to dig a canal across Athos. To turn land into water, as to turn water into land, is to alter the natural order of things, and humans shouldn’t do it.<sup>18</sup> But the Athos canal works, as does the second bridge across the Hellespont. In this way Xerxes can both exhibit *hubris* and get to his *nemesis*.

Xerxes reminds his audience that the Athenians had done harm to the Persians by aiding the Ionian Revolt, and by defeating the force that landed at Marathon. And so they had; and yet to imply that Athens is equally guilty for having responded to the Ionian appeal for aid and for having defended its own territory against an invader seems rhetorically incommensurate. Xerxes says that ‘in conquering Greece we shall so

extend the empire of Persia that its boundaries will be God’s own sky’ (7.8c), which is even more egregious *hubris*; and he says that when Greece is conquered ‘the guilty and the innocent alike shall bear the yoke of servitude’ (7.8c), which is the very definition of arbitrary despotism.

Xerxes has made a case for the invasion; but he doesn’t really have to persuade anyone but himself. Having made his decision, he gives the men of Persia their marching orders. ‘But’ he then says, ‘so that I shall not appear to consult only my own whim’ – though why he should be concerned about this, or why he would consider a deliberate decision a whim, is not explained – ‘I will throw the whole matter into open debate’ (7.8d). This is the cue for Mardonius, whose motives have already been exposed, to open the debate by speaking in favour of invasion. He begins with fulsome praise of Xerxes, and then proceeds to reiterate his reasons for undertaking it. As Herodotus glosses it, ‘Xerxes’ proposals were made to seem plausible by these words of Mardonius’ (7.10). He argues that Persia has conquered countries that had done it no harm, and so must conquer Greece, which has. And whereas previously he had argued that the wealth of Greece was a reason to attempt the conquest, now the poverty of Greece is a reason why the conquest will succeed (7.9a). He then disparages the *nomoi* of the Greeks – the laws and customs by which they govern themselves and the relations among themselves. What he sees as Greek weakness, the Greeks see as one of their strengths. Mardonius thinks it ridiculous that the Greeks are always fighting among themselves; but they fight to defend their freedom, whether that freedom is threatened by an oriental despot or the neighboring *polis*.

When Mardonius finishes speaking, no one is at first willing to take the opposing view. But finally, Artabanus rises to speak. Herodotus explains that he, being an uncle to Xerxes, felt that this would protect him from the consequences of contradicting the king. And Artabanus begins his speech by explaining to Xerxes that ‘Without a debate in which both sides of a question are expressed, it is not possible to choose the better course’ (7.10a). It is worth noting, however, that though Artabanus is here expressing a Greek idea, he is expressing it in the Persian interest. He speaks from his experience serving Persian kings, and he

says what he thinks it is his duty to say. He is one of a number of wise advisors who are featured in the *Histories* of Herodotus, whose wise advice is disregarded by kings who then come to grief.<sup>19</sup> Artabanus had wisely advised Darius not to invade Scythia, from which he had barely escaped with his life after losing many men. That expedition had involved the bridging of the Bosphorus, and the expeditionary force was nearly destroyed when the bridge was nearly destroyed. He reminds Xerxes of this, and of the Persian defeat at the Battle of Marathon. That expedition had sailed across the Aegean, which was not considered an overweening undertaking. In other words, Xerxes needs to consider both whether it is wise to try to invade Greece, and whether the invasion, as undertaken, is likely to succeed. In addressing himself to this proposed expedition, Artabanus refers to the bridging of the Hellespont. Again both the symbolic and the strategic significance of the bridge are evident. The *hubris* is still implicit; Artabanus now raises the prospect of the destruction of this bridge by an Athenian fleet. He urges Xerxes not to undertake the invasion of Greece, which will not be as easy to conquer as Mardonius thinks. All that fighting they do among themselves makes them formidable fighters.

Artabanus asserts, though he has not argued, that ‘there is no necessity’ to conquer Greece. Though he has persuasively responded to Mardonius, the question really hinges on whether the *nomoi* of the Persians make the conquest of the Greeks a *necessity*. Artabanus advises Xerxes to ‘turn the matter over quietly’ by himself, and make his decision when he feels ready to (7.10d). But first he has some further advice about the implications of such decisions. Any action decided upon should be well planned. If it then fails in its intended purpose, it will have failed by chance; and there will still be some satisfaction to be had in its having been well-planned. On the other hand, he says, an ill-planned campaign might succeed by luck; but in that case the success would be tempered by shame at having undertaken such a campaign. Artabanus would seem to be trying to strike a deliberate balance between the ways in which gods and men determine events. But ultimately, Artabanus would have Xerxes keep in mind that ‘amongst living creatures it is the great ones that

God smites with his thunder, out of envy of his pride’ (7.10e). This is an unambiguous warning against *hubris*. That is a religious rather than a logistical matter.

Having given this wise and pious advice to Xerxes, Artabanus addresses some barbaric remarks to Mardonius. He proposes that if the invasion does go ahead, Xerxes should remain at home, and the two of them should leave their children as hostages. If the invasion succeeds, Artabanus and his children would be killed; if it fails, Mardonius and his family would suffer the same fate. Artabanus evidently thinks that the invasion will go ahead, and fail; but that Mardonius will not accept his wager (he does not). ‘In that case’ Artabanus says, ‘I venture a prophecy: the day will come when many a man left at home will hear the news that Mardonius has brought disaster upon Persia, and that his body lies a prey to dogs and birds somewhere in the country of the Athenians or the Spartans.’ That prophecy will come to pass.<sup>20</sup> And what it will mean is that Mardonius had been wrong to urge Persia to attack these Greeks (7.10h).

When Artabanus finished his speech ‘Xerxes was exceedingly angry’ (7.11). Indeed, we might wonder how Artabanus had been permitted to finish. It must be that this phase of the deliberation has less to do with Xerxes’ temper than with Herodotus’ purpose. As Artabanus had prophesied to himself when first venturing to speak, it is only his relationship with Xerxes that now prevents his being put to death. It is very like an arbitrary despot to want to hear only what he wants to hear. But Xerxes refers first to Artabanus’ ‘empty and ridiculous speech’, which does call attention to the merits of the speech rather than to the temerity of the speaker. What did the speech lack or mistake? It avoided the *nomoi*. It may be that despite the motives of Mardonius, the pitfalls of *hubris* and the risk of military defeat, the *nomoi* of the Persians (or of Persian kings) might make it necessary to undertake the invasion of Greece. In advising Xerxes to deliberate by himself, Artabanus (who after all is a wise advisor) acknowledges that the decision is for the king to make, and that he is free to decide either for or against invasion. But in his response to Artabanus’ speech, Xerxes next says that it demonstrated the speaker’s ‘cowardice

and lack of spirit’ (7.11). The king will not execute his uncle for his speech, but will punish him for his cowardice. ‘I forbid you to accompany me on my march to Greece’ Xerxes announces; ‘you shall stay home with the women, and everything I spoke of I shall accomplish without help from you’ (7.11). What he means to accomplish is what all Persian kings must accomplish, because all the others have done so. And so, says Xerxes, ‘if I fail to punish the Athenians, let me be no child of Darius’ – which means no King of Persia (7.11).<sup>21</sup>

But having given that nod to the *nomoi* of the Persians, Xerxes makes some questionable claims about the Athenians. He argues that ‘if we make no move, the Athenians will – they will be sure to invade our country’ (7.11). The Athenians were certainly not contemplating such an invasion. They had indeed, as Xerxes says, ‘marched into Asia and burnt Sardis’ in support of the Ionian Revolt; but only as many men marched as had come on the 20 ships Athens had sent, and the burning of Sardis was unintentional (5.99–103). The Athenians then left, and Persia put down the revolt. What the Athenians did was certainly an impertinence; but to make it the basis of a claim that Athens posed an existential threat to the Persian Empire is an example of asymmetrical rhetoric. Nevertheless, Xerxes is caught up in the logic of that rhetoric. ‘One has but to make the inference from what they did before’ he tells his leading men. ‘Retreat is no longer possible for either of us: if we do not inflict the wound, we shall assuredly receive it. All we possess will pass to the Greeks, or all they possess will pass to the Persians’ (7.11). All this is supposed to follow from the necessity for revenge; and yet we have seen that the necessity of conquest doesn’t necessarily follow the same logic.

One last observation Xerxes makes seems enigmatic as it stands, but anticipates an important consideration in the next phase of the deliberations. He ends this second speech, as he had begun the first, determined to invade Greece. Here he says that in conquering Greece he will ‘learn the nature of this terrible thing which is to happen to [him]’ (7.11). What terrible thing is he thinking of? Surely the conquest of Greece would be a good thing for him. He has decided to undertake the conquest rather than not, but will change his mind twice more; he is

certain the conquest will be a success, but of course we know that it will not be. Just what does follow from what is done, or not? If it is up to him to decide what to do, is it up to someone else to determine what will happen?

‘So ended the speeches at the conference’ Herodotus tells us. ‘Later on that evening’ he continues ‘Xerxes began to be worried about 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’ (7.12). In other words, having rejected Artabanus’ advice, he now accepts it. On the one hand, this evinces wisdom; on the other hand, it demonstrates irresolution. But it would be a good thing for him to change his mind, unless it turned out to be a bad thing. Herodotus tells us that having decided *not* to undertake the expedition to Greece, Xerxes went to sleep; then he says that ‘the Persians say that before the night was over he dreamed that the figure of a man, tall, and of noble aspect, stood by his bed’ (7.12). The staged debate had seemed Greek; this phase of the deliberation is explicitly attributed to the Persians. The figure in the dream tells Xerxes that it was wrong of him to change his mind. The emphasis, indeed, in this first of three dreams recounted, is not on the expedition, but on the decision to undertake it. “‘Persian’ the phantom said, ‘have you changed your mind and decided not to lead an army against Greece, in spite of your proclamation to your subjects that troops should be raised? You are wrong to change’” (7.12). Evidently the dream thinks that it is bad policy for a king to come to a decision and then reconsider it. But apparently the dream is the only one who thinks so, for it adds, rather enigmatically, that ‘there is one here who will not forgive you’ for deciding not to invade Greece (7.12).

Throughout the *Histories*, dreams are understood to be messages from the gods; they are supposed to be as authoritative as oracles.<sup>22</sup> For some reason, though, Xerxes disregards this dream, and announces to the leading men of Persia that he will not, after all, lead an expedition to Greece. His speech is a model of modesty, reflection, and consideration. He addresses as ‘Gentlemen’ those who are his slaves; he asks for their ‘forbearance’ for the change of plan. He acknowledges his youth and

inexperience, and regrets having been disrespectful to the aged Artabanus. It is not the sort of speech one expects from a Persian king, and it could be taken as evidence of Xerxes’ weakness. This may be what the dream had in mind. But none of the leading Persians seem inclined not to forgive him; for when Xerxes announced to them that ‘there will be no war against Greece. Peace is to continue’ (7.13), ‘the Persians were delighted...and bowed low before their master’ (7.14).

The next night the dream returns and rebukes Xerxes for having disregarded his previous admonition. Then he goes on to speak more explicitly about the expedition against Greece, and threatens that if Xerxes does not undertake it, then ‘just as in a moment you rose to greatness and power, so in a moment will you be brought low again’ (7.14). Now, on the one hand, this threat is rather generic; on the other hand, the genre involved is very compelling. Kingdoms, and kings, rise and fall; men want to think that they control their fates, but the gods are always ready to let them know who is really in charge. The threat this dream delivers to Xerxes reflects the perspective adopted by Herodotus at the outset of his *Histories*. ‘I will proceed with my history’ he says, ‘telling the story as I go along of small cities of men no less than of great. For most of those which were once great are small today; and those which used to be small were great in my own time. Knowing, therefore, that human prosperity never abides long in the same place, I shall pay attention to both alike’ (1.5).

Though the message of the second dream was generally threatening, it was not particularly terrifying; and yet Xerxes is terrified by it, and sends for Artabanus. He is now inclined to do as the dream tells him (though that would entail yet another change of mind); but he is still of a mind to be advised by his uncle. He admits to Artabanus personally what he had acknowledged in his speech to the gentlemen generally – that he had acted badly in response to his earlier advice. He adds in his own defence that he changed his mind when he decided that that advice had been right (Artabanus had advised him precisely to consider the matter further). He still thinks that Artabanus is a wise advisor, but tells him that ‘since I changed my mind I have been haunted by a dream which will not allow me to act as you advised’ (7.15). He assumes that the

dream is divine, but also wants to test it. The test he contrives is curious, but serves the purpose. Xerxes tells Artabanus that if the dream is divine it will appear to him too, if he is sleeping in Xerxes’ bed, having worn his clothes and sat on his throne. Artabanus doesn’t think it right for him to pose as the king, but agrees to do so when he is told to. At this point, Xerxes believes more in the divinity of the dream, and Artabanus is more dubious that the dream could be fooled by their ruse; but perhaps to emphasise that he doesn’t want to *be* king, but only to *advise* him, Artabanus comes out with more advice. He assures Xerxes that he had not taken personally the previous unpleasantness, but was grieved to see him take the bad advice of Mardonius. He now praises Xerxes for being willing and able to change his mind on further reflection. Of course, this is just what the dream thought wrong of him. Artabanus speaks of ‘how wrong it is to teach the heart always to seek for more than it possesses’ (7.16a), though the dream thinks that to seek for more is *precisely* what Xerxes must do. But what does Artabanus think of the dream? This is a very interesting twist in the deliberation. ‘You imagine’ Artabanus tells Xerxes, ‘that your dream was sent by some god or other; but dreams do not come from God. I, who am older than you by many years, will tell you what these visions are that float before our eyes in sleep: nearly always these drifting phantoms are the shadows of what we have been thinking about during the day; and during the days before your dream we were, you know, very much occupied with this campaign’ (7.16c).

This is, in a nutshell, the modern psychoanalytic view of where dreams come from. It is not Herodotus’ view; no one else in the *Histories* says anything like this about any of the many other dreams he recounts; and Artabanus will soon be proved wrong. But this dream could still be read that way. And Artabanus, though he is wrong, is not being set up for a fall, as those usually are who express sentiments contrary to common piety. He gives this advice on the basis of his age and experience, which is what grounds all his wise advice. And then, having said what he thinks is right, he acknowledges that he could be wrong, and expresses a willingness to change his mind if he is.

Artabanus wears Xerxes’ clothes, sits on his throne, and retires to his bed. The

dream indeed reappears, but recognises Artabanus. The figure dismisses Artabanus' wise advice as 'would-be concern for the king' (7.17), and warns that he will 'not escape punishment either now or hereafter' for giving that advice, just as Xerxes will be punished for taking it. The dream's take on the deliberation raises again the question of fate. The dream had threatened Xerxes with what would happen *if* he did not do as he was told. The implication is that Xerxes can still choose to undertake the expedition or not. Now the dream threatens Artabanus 'for seeking to turn aside *that which must happen*' (emphasis mine), which more explicitly indicates that Xerxes has no choice (7.17). The dream then goes to punish Artabanus, but Artabanus escapes (he had also escaped the punishment Xerxes said he would not escape). He is convinced, however, that the dream is divine. He now advises Xerxes to undertake the expedition, though not without first reiterating the reasoning behind his previously wise advice. He seems now to know what's what; but he doesn't: he knows 'that God is at work in this matter' but assumes this means that 'heaven itself is about to send ruin on Greece' (7.18). That God might want Xerxes to invade Greece, so as to send ruin on *him*, does not occur to Artabanus. That sort of dream, though, would be familiar to the Herodotean audience because they would have read (or heard) their Homer. In Book 2 of the *Iliad*, Zeus sends a dream to Agamemnon, telling him to attack Troy; but not telling him that the attack will fail.

Xerxes is now determined to undertake the invasion of Greece that his father had ordered, and announces to the leading Persians that the expedition that was first on, and then off, is now back on. He then has a third dream, though the tall noble figure doesn't figure in it. Instead, Xerxes 'imagined himself crowned with olive, of which the branches spread all over the earth; then the crown had suddenly vanished from his head' (7.19). This time he consults the Magi, a priestly caste in the service of the Persian crown, who are supposed to know how to interpret dreams. According to the Magi, the dream 'portended the conquest of the world and its total subjection to Persia' (7.19).

How the disappearance of Xerxes' crown portended his rule over the whole world is not explained, or questioned; at

this point in the narrative, the preparations for the expedition against Greece shift into high gear, and go on for four years. Then the expedition begins. Herodotus skates over these preparations just as readily as a Herodotean reading of the expedition can skip the deliberations. But this alternative and no less Herodotean reading of what went on between Marathon and Thermopylae might better serve the purposes of Herodotean teaching and learning.

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## Reference

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<sup>1</sup>The 2-DVD edition of 300 has some teachable features.

<sup>2</sup>Darius did not die as a result of a wound received at Marathon from an arrow fired at him by Themistocles, as shown in 300: Rise of an Empire. Neither man was present at the battle.

<sup>3</sup>Here, when Xerxes is advised not to go to war against Greece, Artemisia sends him into the desert, to a cavern inhabited by evil hermits, where he bathes in the golden pool that turns him into the giant, shiny, bejeweled god featured in the first 300 movie. Meanwhile, Artemisia murders all his advisers. In *The Histories*, Artemisia advises Xerxes not to engage in a naval battle with the Greek fleet at Salamis (8.68).

<sup>4</sup>Atossa is the most prominent character in Aeschylus' tragedy *The Persians*.

<sup>5</sup>The most striking instance of this legal question involves King Cambyses, who fell in love with his sister and consulted Persian legal experts to see whether the law permitted him to marry her. The legal experts reported back that 'though they could discover no law which allowed brother to marry sister, there was undoubtedly a law which permitted the king of Persia to do what he pleased' (3.31). Cambyses married two of his sisters, and later murdered one of them – according to one account, while she was pregnant; and according to another, because she was sorry he had killed their brother.

<sup>6</sup>This episode is best known for its constitutional debate. Once the usurper is dispatched, there is a debate about what sort

of government Persia should now have. Two of the group argue for democratic and aristocratic governments; Darius argues for monarchy, and wins the debate. He is then chosen king (3. 80-88).

<sup>7</sup>This very interesting episode, which is also recounted in Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*, can be found in 1.107-129.

<sup>8</sup>For other interesting women in Herodotus, see, inter alia, 1.8-14, 1.205-14, 3.68-70, 5.51

<sup>9</sup>Xerxes, in a sense, owes his throne to Demaratus. In 300: Rise of an Empire, Xerxes owes his throne to Artemisia. She is, to be sure, one of Herodotus' most interesting women; but the recent movie makes her a bloody, lusty monster. By contrast, the 1961 movie *The 300 Spartans* gives Demaratus his due.

<sup>10</sup>The ousted Athenian tyrant Hippias had fled to Persia, and accompanied the expedition to Marathon (see below). Themistocles himself ended up in the service of Persia.

<sup>11</sup>For discussions of poverty and opulence, see, inter alia, 1.71, 89, 126, 207; 5.49; 7.102; 9.82, 122.

<sup>12</sup>Herodotus had narrated the establishment of the Peisistratid tyranny in Book 1 (1.59-64), emphasising the difficulty Peisistratus had in establishing it.

<sup>13</sup>For other episodes involving the corruption of oracles, see 5.63 and 6.66. Episodes in which oracles work as advertised are too numerous to cite.

<sup>14</sup>The classic treatment of this theme is J. A. S. Evans, "The Dream of Xerxes and the 'nomoi' of the Persians," *The Classical Journal* Vol. 57, No. 3. (Dec. 1961), pp. 109-111.

<sup>15</sup>For examples of Cambyses' infamies, see 3.27-38.

<sup>16</sup>Cyrus was killed in his campaign (1.201-214); Darius nearly was in his (4.1-142).

<sup>17</sup>The earliest and best-known episode in which hubris is exhibited and punished is the rise and fall of Croesus (1.25-92).

<sup>18</sup>For an example of what happens when people try to turn a peninsula into an island, see 1. 174.

<sup>19</sup>The classic treatment of this theme is Richmond Lattimore, "The Wise Advisor in Herodotus' *Classical Philology*, Vol. 34, No. 1. (Jan. 1939) pp. 24-35. Artemisia is also a 'Wise Advisor'.

<sup>20</sup>8.114; 9.63-4, 84.

<sup>21</sup>Xerxes was, years later, killed in a palace coup; and was succeeded by his son.

<sup>22</sup>For examples of Herodotean dreams, see, inter alia, 1.107-8, 1.209-10, 3.30, 6.107.