

The Trial of Orontas: *Anabasis* 1.6
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With its chilly denouement the story of the trial and execution of Orontas is one of the most striking episodes in the *Anabasis*. For the historian it presents two challenges: explaining the passage itself and then inserting it into our picture of Achaemenid history.

The first question we have to ask is why Cyrus had tolerated Orontas for so long. Was it simply because he was magnanimous (Anderson 1974), or was he in thrall to something prominent in the Persian *psyche*, namely the prohibition on killing for a first offence (Hdt. 1.13.7), or was it simply that he needed him too much? The actual trial will be examined in the light of what we know of Persian administration of justice. At this stage two features pique curiosity. Why seven nobles? The significance of the number in Mazdaism is well known and it occurs on at least two significant moments in Herodotus' narrative, the conspiracy of Darius and the embassy of Persians to Macedonia (Hdt. 3.76; 5.17). Are we looking at coincidence here or were seven participants to be found as a matter of course on occasions of great moment. Then again we might reasonably ask what a Spartan mercenary was doing sitting in judgement on a Persian grandee.

Petit (2004) argued that Persian society could be seen as feudal with relations analogous to that of medieval Europe. This may well be true but it should not obscure the fact that we could also be looking here at a code of chivalry grounded in the notion of "respect" as it is still understood in southern Europe to this day. Orontas was not a feudal lord. He was a man of courage and, though power and life were to be about to be taken from him, that had to be acknowledged still by the bow made to him by his peers.

Finally, we cannot contradict Xenophon when he says Orontas' tomb could never be found and it seems reasonable to agree with those who think this was to prevent it becoming a place of pilgrimage for the disaffected. However, Cyrus' action reminds us of a similar act of Octavian's in 36 B.C. (App *BC* 5.128) when he in a similar fashion "disappeared" a troublesome centurion. Power was being displayed, power so great as to wipe every trace of an opponent from the face of the earth. To those who witnessed this the lesson to be drawn was obvious.

My tentative conclusion from all of this would be that we have here illustrated what we may call Cyrus' dilemma. He may aspire to be "King of the land" but what is revealed here is that he must compromise in order to achieve that goal which is not yet.