

The Abuse of Corpses and the Passion of Tyrants: The Madness of Cambyses and Achilles

In the third book of his *Histories*, Herodotus tells of Cambyses' expedition into Egypt. Cambyses' reason for the expedition, as Herodotus relates, is his feeling of extreme passion (μεγάλως θυμωθέντα, 3.1.5) because Amasis deceived him by sending the daughter of a former rival as a bride instead of his own daughter (3.1). By the time Cambyses arrives, however, Amasis has already died and been mummified and entombed (ἀποθανῶν δὲ καὶ ταριχευθεὶς ἐτάφῃ, 3.10.2). Nevertheless, Cambyses breaks into the tomb of Amasis and

ordered [his men] to whip the corpse, to tear out its hair, to beat it with goads, and to mistreat it (λυμαίνεσθαι) in every other way. After a while they grew weary as they continued to do these things—for the corpse, since it had been embalmed (τεταριχευμένος), endured (ἀντεῖχέ) and would not fall apart. (3.16.1-2)

Cambyses finally sets Amasis' mummified corpse on fire, a violation of both Egyptian and Persian *nomoi* (3.16.1-2; cf. Baragwanath 2008: 116n82).

The image of a tyrant's anger carried out violently against mute and lifeless bodies finds parallels elsewhere in the *Histories*, as when Cyrus punishes the River Gyndes (1.189), or when Xerxes orders the Hellespont whipped, chained, branded, and verbally abused (7.35). Xerxes violates cultural norms when he orders Leonidas' head cut off and impaled on a stake—an index of his extreme hatred for Leonidas, for otherwise, Herodotus says, a Persian would never commit so foul an act (7.238). Generally speaking, the violation of cultural norms is typical of tyrants according to Otanes (νόμιαί τε κινέει πάρια, 3.80.5), and this inconsistency is internalized within the tyrant's own character (ἀναρμοστώτατον δὲ πάντων, 3.80.5). Nevertheless, Cambyses' treatment of Amasis' corpse is represented as beyond the pale: unlike Xerxes, he is called mad,

for only a madman willingly violates all cultural standards (3.38; Selden 1999: 56, Baragwanath 2008: 108).

Cambyses' madness sets him out as a special figure in the *Histories*, a figure lost to his own extreme passions and appetites. It is this madness I wish to investigate in my paper, arguing that Herodotus drew upon the representation of Homer's Achilles—whether consciously nor not (cf. Lloyd 1988: 57-62)—while creating this complex character, driven to violate cultural norms through his extreme passions. Cambyses' treatment of Amasis' corpse is highly reminiscent of Achilles' abuse of Hector's body—a comparison drawn by some scholars, but only by way of noting how sentiments toward the dead have changed from Homer's time to Herodotus' (Brown 1982: 393n18, Asheri, Lloyd, and Corcella 2007: 414-15). The mummified body of Amasis recalls the body of Hector, protected from decay by ambrosial oil and a dark cloud (*Iliad* XXIII 179-191; cf. XXIV 411-423), temporarily preserved like the bodies of Patroclus (XIX 21-39) and Sarpedon (XVI 667-675; cf. Vernant 1991: 73-74, Garcia Jr. 2013: 65-94). The verb *ταρχύειν*, used to describe the funeral rites and preservation of corpses in Homer (e.g., VII 84-85) may share the same root (**tṛh₂*) with the verb Herodotus uses to describe the mummified corpse of Amasis: *ταρῖχεύειν* “to preserve a body by embalming; to preserve food by salting, pickling, or smoking” (*ταρῖχευθεῖς*, 3.10.2; *τεταρῖχευμένος*, 3.16.2; cf. Garcia Jr. 2013: 68-69).

Further, Herodotus describes Cambyses' madness with the participle *ὑπομαργότερος* (3.29), cognate with the verb *μαργαίνω* used of the Homeric hero's madness in the midst of his *aristeia* (*Iliad* V.882; cf. Beekes 2010, *s.v.* *μάργος*). At the moment of extreme loss, anger gives way to something else (Konstan 2007: 49-55): Achilles' rage at Agamemnon is replaced with a different sort of feeling toward Hector, an urge to obliterate him altogether. This same urge, I

argue, drives Cambyses to his outrages that serve only to alienate him from both men and gods. Such is the madness of extreme characters.

Bibliography

Asheri, D., A. B. Lloyd, and A. Corcella. (2007). *A Commentary on Herodotus, Books I-IV*.

Edited by O. Murray and A. Moreno; translated by B. Graziosi et al. Oxford.

Baragwanath, E. (2008). *Motivation and Narrative in Herodotus*. Oxford.

Beekes, R. (2010). *Etymological Dictionary of Greek*. 2 vols. Leiden.

Brown, T. S. (1982). "Herodotus' Portrait of Cambyses." *Historia* 31: 387-403.

Garcia Jr., L. F. (2013). *Homeric Durability: Telling Time in the Iliad*. Washington, DC.

Konstan, D. 2007. *The Emotions of the Ancient Greeks*. Toronto.

Lloyd, A. B. (1988). "Herodotus on Cambyses: Some Thoughts on Recent Work." In A. Kuhrt

and H. Sancisi-Weerdenburg, eds., *Achaemenid History III: Method and Theory*. Leiden, pp.

55–66.

Selden, D. (1999). "Cambyses' Madness, or the Reason of History." *MD* 42: 33–63.

Vernant, J.-P. (1991). *Mortals and Immortals*. Translated and edited by F. Zeitlin. Princeton.