

Herodotus' Characterization of a Divine Xerxes

Herodotus' characterization of Xerxes has been a frequent area of interest in Herodotean scholarship. Scholars have often seen the Persian king in a negative light based on Herodotus' historical narrative, holding him to be a cruel and arrogant ruler. Donald Lateiner specifically refers to Xerxes as an overly ambitious "despot" who treats all of his subjects as slaves. He goes on to describe the king by saying that "Xerxes' expedition is due to his own insecurity and need to prove himself, and his megalomania" (Lateiner, 1989). Henry Immerwahr and Emily Baragwanath describe the Persian king as a man motivated by passion rather than reason, who is easily overtaken by emotion (Immerwahr, 1966; Baragwanath, 2000). Recently, however, scholars such as Baragwanath and Heleen Sancisi-Weerdenburg have emphasized a more positive view of Xerxes (Sancisi-Weerdenburg, 2002). These scholars have tried to view Xerxes "in terms of more complex motives" (Baragwanath, 2000), viewing him as a tragic figure or as a representation of the "other" in the Greek imagination.

Keeping both negative and positive views of the Persian king in mind, this paper will explore how Herodotus deals with the idea of Xerxes as a self-appointed challenger to the gods. Through a careful reading of Herodotus' *Histories* I will argue that Herodotus firmly and purposefully asserts Xerxes' mortality and subservience to the will of the gods, despite the king's attempts to appear otherwise. In tracing this divine presentation and undercutting of Xerxes, I will first focus on how Xerxes elevates himself directly or indirectly to challenge the will of the gods through his own words and actions. In each of these examples, Herodotus can also be seen intentionally undercutting Xerxes' self-appointed godlike appearance. This paper will also analyze how Herodotus' use of mythic allusion serves to dispel any idea of Xerxes' divine status or the appearance thereof. In tracing these intentional mythical allusions, specifically found in

the geography of his march from the Bosphorus into Greece, Xerxes can be seen as a just one of many kings who have tried and failed to rival the gods. Ultimately, I will conclude that Herodotus' presentation of Xerxes both as a relatable and, in many ways, Greek tragic figure, as well as an arrogant, self-appointed challenger to the gods serves as a warning to the Athenians of Herodotus' own day as they threaten to imitate Xerxes' ambition.

Bibliography

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