

Violence and Imperial Anxiety: The Case of Cambyses

Herodotus' propagandistic narrative tells us of a mentally unstable Cambyses who is eager to continue his father's territorial expansion; while Cambyses does succeed in adding Egypt to the regions under Achaemenid administration, he is unable to maintain stability in the empire. Herodotus illustrates this instability through depictions of Cambyses' impious and extreme acts, creating a parallel between the king's mental state and the imperial state (see, e.g., Briant 1996: 55-61 for discussion of Herodotus' fictive approach to Cambyses' rule in Egypt). Cambyses continues to display extreme decision-making, as he stabs the Apis bull in Egypt (3.29-30, 3.38; foreshadowing his own death from an infected stab wound, 3.64) and attempts in vain to reach the farthest borders of Ethiopia. However, less discussed are his domestic violations, episodes of extreme violence that suggest Cambyses is an equally inefficient ruler at home.

This paper examines one such episode, the flaying of Sisamnes (5.25), as a case study for Cambyses' attempts to control his domestic imperial narrative. Sisamnes allows himself to be bribed to make certain judgments, and in revenge Cambyses strips him of his skin and uses the skin to string a judge's chair; Sisamnes' son Otanes is then named as replacement and is forced to sit upon the chair. The presence of Sisamnes' skin, upon which Otanes will sit throughout his duration as judge, ensures that Otanes will constantly be reminded of the punishment for judicial corruption and failure to uphold the king's truth, as evidenced by Cambyses' threat to "remember on which chair he sits and judges." I argue that there is an additional reading that furthers Herodotus' anti-Cambyses narrative and must be considered alongside the visible display of a mutilated body part: impious sacrifice.

The Apis bull episode shows Cambyses' disregard for the religious practices of his imperial subjects; the Sisamnes incident suggests that he is unable to properly observe his own religious practices as well. Sisamnes' execution is described foremost as ritual slaughter (σφάξας), and even the very act of flaying is inherently dehumanizing (Bosak-Schroeder 2019; cf. also the flaying of the satyr Marsyas, 7.26.2). The death is framed as an animal sacrifice, with the skin treated like animal leather (ιμάντας; cf. Hornblower 2013 *ad loc.*), yet the narrator consistently reminds the audience that Sisamnes is human (e.g. τὴν ἀνθρωπέην), not bestial, and ensures his visibility through language as well as display. Such inappropriate treatment of a human body not only contributes to the Herodotean motifs of Cambyses' and impiety, but it also reinforces his inability to rule, both abroad and at home.

Bibliography

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