

## Bridging Babylon: Queen Nitocris and Imperial Expansion in Herodotus' *Histories*

Building projects are a source of fascination for Herodotus. Almost inherently, works of architecture and engineering are ἔργα μεγάλα τε καὶ θωμαστά (1.1), and as a result they feature prominently in the *Histories* and have been treated in scholarship (e.g., Immerwahr, Romm). The function of women in the *Histories* also continues to be of interest to scholars who see women as foils for the expansionist transgressions of Persian rulers (e.g., Lateiner, Dewald). These central topics in Herodotus' logoi come together in one of the first building projects described, that of Queen Nitocris of Babylon (1.184–87), whose priorities and monuments shape the way readers interpret royal building. Nitocris' works are unique and can be read as a foil to later Persian building and imperial expansion.

Herodotus bestows significant praise upon Nitocris for her building endeavors (1.185–86), and some scholarship has addressed her improvements to her city (e.g., Kuhrt, MacGinnis). Most scholarship focuses on her tomb, which features an inscription designed to communicate directly with later rulers (e.g., Dillery, West, Baragwanath, Tourraix). She correctly predicts how Darius, although a later ruler and of a different nationality, will interpret her words, thereby using the power of permanence and communication inherent in monuments. She uses precise forethought and understanding of human nature (e.g., Baragwanath).

I focus, however, on her lesser-studied monumental bridge, located in the middle of Babylon. Nitocris pragmatically and proactively reacts to the Median threat by altering the course of the Euphrates, and excavating a lake to build an embankment, which Herodotus calls ἄξιον θώματος μέγαθος καὶ ὕψος (1.185, “worthy of wonder in magnitude and height”). Efficiently, she also builds an embankment and bridge within Babylon using stone from

quarrying the same lake, providing a crossing for the city's inhabitants and building a lasting stone memorial (1.186, μνημόσυνον). The bridge's placement in the middle of the city unites Babylon with itself. Thinking ahead, Nitocris also makes the bridge impassable at night to prevent theft (1.186).

Although Nitocris' bridge spans Babylon, she does not invade the land of others (Munson). In contrast, later bridges described in the *Histories* are tools of imperial expansion, and a deep fear of their failure surrounds these projects. Herodotus never calls the bridge of a Persian king a memorial; instead, the possibility that bridges can be demolished is repeatedly shown (e.g., 4.97, 4.139–41, 7.10B–C, 7.34–35, 8.97, 8.110–11, 8.117, 9.106, 9.114). The ease with which they crumble, and the disastrous consequences thereof, oppose bridges to lasting monuments. Croesus, Cyrus, Darius, and most famously Xerxes all expand with bridges, and all ultimately suffer consequences for their expansion projects; in Darius' and Xerxes' case, moreover, the bridge's instability itself causes setbacks (4.140, 7.34–35, 8.117). The true danger, for rulers, of using bridges for expansion is that they might cross a boundary that cannot be recrossed, and thereby lose their homeland, nationality, and identity. Queen Nitocris' bridge back in Book 1 of the *Histories* shows that she, much earlier, understands what later Persian rulers do not: if, like Xerxes (7.8A), your *nomos* is expansion, you might very well lose your own *nomoi*.

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