

## The Progress of Persian Diplomacy in Herodotus' *Histories*

The Persians' urge to empire is one of the dominating themes of Herodotus' *Histories*, which tracks its beginnings and rapid growth under Cyrus to its failure against the allied Greek forces at Salamis, Plataea, and Mycale. This narrative thread focuses on the Persian Empire's spread through wars of conquest, or hard power. Herodotus' narrative, however, also shows the development of Persian diplomacy, or soft power, especially in their interactions with various Greeks. Many scholars have tackled aspects of Persian diplomacy in the *Histories*, but their focus has largely been upon diplomacy broadly conceived (Cohen 2001) or on the meaning of the demand for earth and water (Sealey 1976, West 2011). This paper will show how, through an analysis of meetings between representatives of various Greek poleis and high-ranking Persians, we see a steady increase in Persia's awareness and knowledge of the cultural and political realities of mainland Greece.

Herodotus' *Histories* offers its readers several scenes of meetings and conversations between Persians and Greeks, as well as discussions by the Persians about the Greeks; this paper will focus on more official meetings, and how those interactions shift in tenor over time. In Book 1, the Spartans send a delegation to Cyrus after his defeat of Croesus. Cyrus' response to the delegation reveals a basic understanding of Greek society, but also a lack of recognition of the significant difference between Greek *poleis* (1.153). Book 5 offers several examples of Greek / Persian official interaction, the most significant being the Athenian delegation seeking alliance with Persia (5.73) and the later break down of that alliance (5.96). The Persian satrap Artaphrenes reveals a better understanding of the variations in Greek society, but not internal political concerns of individual *poleis*. At the beginning of Book 7, Mardonius gives many

reasons for how the conquest of Greece will be easy, including their lack of unity (7.9B). While Mardonius draws too rosy a picture of the possibility of Persian success, his analysis of the weakness of Greek society due to its lack of unification is correct. The Persians will go on to exploit the divisions among the Greeks throughout the remainder of the *Histories*, most notably in their offer of alliance to Athens in Book 8, with Alexander of Macedon as emissary (see Sears 2009 for an exploration of this choice). Their actions and official delegations in the latter books of the *Histories* reveals an ever-increasing knowledge of Greek society as a whole and the variations and disagreements among the different *poleis*.

While Herodotus, early on, shows Persian diplomacy and expressions of “soft power” to be heavy handed or wrong headed in their interactions with other peoples, notably the Babylonians, Ethiopians, and Egyptians, the historical record and non-Greek sources show otherwise. The Persians generally show a sensitivity to cultural values and a good awareness of potential fissures within a society. In their interactions with the Greeks, the Persians seem to start the same way as Herodotus depicts them interacting with other societies; gradually, however, the Persians reveal the same sensitivity and awareness of Greek society as they demonstrate in our other sources. That the Persians are unsuccessful in their invasion does not mean that they were wrong in what aspects of Greek society they manipulated, and should serve, perhaps, as yet another warning to the Greeks about their own lack of unity.

### Bibliography

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