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THE PERSONALITY OF XERXES, KING OF KINGS

BY

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To Louis Vanden Berghe, with warm gratitude

A first glance at the current manuals on Persian history would suggest that we are well acquainted with the personality of Xerxes, king of the Achaemenid empire from his accession in 486 till his murder in 465. Born the son of Atossa, the daughter of Cyrus the Great, during the kingship of his father Darius he was raised mostly in the harem (Plato *Leges* 694D). His father nominated him as his successor (XPf 30-32, Hdt. VII 1-2) either for dynastic reasons or because of the influence of his mother at court. Soon after his accession to the throne he had to cope with rebellions in Egypt and Babylonia. The Babylonian revolt in particular was the prelude to a new policy towards subject populations: Xerxes did not attempt to continue the well-known Achaemenid policy of respecting national and religious feelings reflected in titles such as 'king of Babylon, king of lands', but henceforth called himself merely 'king of lands', thus showing overt disregard for Babylonian national pride most clearly demonstrated by the removal of the cult-statue of Marduk from its sanctuary (Hdt. I 183). A few years later he ventured on an expedition against Greece at the head of an enormous army that was brought together after three years of preparations. Notwithstanding the huge expedition-force and a few initial successes, Xerxes' fleet was defeated at Salamis and the king departed hastily from Greek soil, leaving behind his general Mardonius and a number of picked troops. Mardonius did not fare better than his master and in 479 the remainder of the Persian army was destroyed at Plataea. Back in his own territory Xerxes apparently gave up plans for a conquest of Greece and devoted his time to two matters: building and women. On this second matter, we are apparently 'well-informed': apart from Herodotus' mention of the intervention of Atossa in the succession to the throne (VII 3), and another reference to the behaviour of Amestris, Xerxes' wife, who had sacrificed in old age seven young Persian men and seven girls to the god of the underworld as a substitute for herself (Hdt. VII 114), we have the famous episode of Xerxes' infatuation with his niece Artaynte, a dramatic story that resulted in the death of Xerxes' full brother Masistes and his whole family (Hdt IX 108-113). Xerxes' building-activities are very well known, both from

the extant remains and from a number of inscriptions. Much of what is now still visible at Persepolis, was completed or constructed during Xerxes' reign, in particular the most impressive palace, the Apadana, was finished by him. His portrait once adorned the central and most conspicuous place on the reliefs but was removed to the Treasury at some point after his death, possibly as a result of the confused situation at court after the palace-conspiracy to which not only Xerxes, but also his designated successor and eldest son Darius fell victim.

THE SOURCES

These biographical outlines are based on a variety of sources: the most important and most elaborate being Herodotus' description of Xerxes' campaign in books VI to IX of the *Histories*. Evidence from other sources, royal inscriptions, Babylonian documents and archeological evidence complements or confirms the picture. As a result, our conclusions on the personality of Xerxes, his character and psychological demeanor seem well established: he was a bigot, passionate and a neurasthenic (Dunlop 1912: 74), he was self-righteous (Cook 1983: 122), he was very much in the shadow of, and under the influence of his father (Frye 1983: 126), a sovereign of indolent nature (Arborio Mella 1979: 72), no easy master (Burn 1985: 331), a womaniser whose most impressive construction was the harem-building (Nyberg 1954: 98), a creature motivated by passion rather than by reason (Immerwahr 1966: 177). In short, Xerxes was a weak personality whose faults showed mostly in his religious fanaticism, in his aesthetic enjoyment of beautiful surroundings and he wasted his time on women of pernicious influence at the cost of state-affairs. These statements on Xerxes' character are taken from both scholarly and more popular discussions of the Persian empire. It is not difficult to expand this randomly chosen small collection of samples:¹ there seems to be almost general agreement as to history's verdict on Xerxes: a second rate personality and not really worthy of the throne of his father.

It is remarkable that this picture of Xerxes, based for the larger part on Greek sources, whose helleno-centric bias was recognised long ago, underwent no changes after the discovery of inscriptions by Xerxes himself, the Daiva and the Harem-inscription in 1935 and XPl in 1967. On the contrary, these new documents seemed to confirm the judgment of religious intolerance and of inadequacy in comparison to his father Darius. Taking together all the evidence it seems as if there are few monarchs in the ancient world whose personality and

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psychological motivations are so well known to us as Xerxes.

In recent years some criticism has been proffered of this traditional, virtually unchanging portrait of Xerxes. The evidence for a change of religious policy in Xerxes' reign is far less firm than has been concluded generally: the famous passage of Herodotus on the removal of the cult-statue of Marduk has been misread (Kuhrt & Sherwin-White 1987: 71f.), there is (new as well as overlooked) evidence that the titulary in Babylon did not change in as drastic a way as has often been assumed (*ibid.*: 72f.), the famous Daiva-inscription is not a complete *novum* but an elaboration of statements already formulated in DB V (Sancisi-Weerdenburg 1980: 16ff.). In other respects too, similar criticisms may be made. This could result in some small corrections of the prevailing ideas on Xerxes' character but it may be more appropriate to investigate how this image originated, on what sources it is based and what kind of reliable information these sources are likely to yield. This is a question that is equally relevant to much other information on the Persian empire. For many chronological and factual data we have to rely on Greek sources. Knowledge handed down from antiquity has acquired the sanctioning of tradition: the Greeks had been there, had observed and had come into close contact with the Persians. Their reports are treated as primary evidence, while neglecting one of the most fundamental historical rules of dealing with sources. In the case of Xerxes the usual procedure is as follows: For what we know from Herodotus that Xerxes must have been like, corroboration is sought in Persian sources and not the other way round. If we know from a (clearly novelistic) tale in the *Histories* that Xerxes had a love-affair (and so what: are there any monarchs who have never used their exalted position in order to seduce a beautiful girl?) this 'fact' can be used to interpret Xerxes' building policy which leads furthermore to the 'conclusion' that is understandable that the 'Harem' was Xerxes' most impressive building (if the usually so-called building was indeed a harem, cf. De Francovich 1966: 209).

This type of reasoning consists of a number of doubtful links. First, it is by no means certain if Greek descriptions of Xerxes provide us with hard *facts* about the king's character. On the contrary, there is sufficient reason, as I will discuss below, that this is not the case. Secondly, the building of a royal residence is the result of a great number of factors, including ancient cultural traditions, newly introduced elements from surrounding cultures, the availability of models, material and craftsmen, administrative, bureaucratic, but also ideological and legitimising needs. In short, a king can express his wishes or even

impose his whims, but this is hardly more than one factor in a very complex system and rarely the determining one. In the superficial connection, traditionally made between the personality of Xerxes and the documents from the heartland of the empire, the state is usually regarded as a one-man-show and the forces and momentum of the Iranian and Mesopotamian traditions are often completely overlooked. This third point violates one of the most fundamental historical rules, namely that each source should primarily be evaluated on its own merits and within its cultural surroundings. The case of Xerxes is particularly illuminating as it demonstrates how pervasive the often mentioned helleno-centric bias in our views of ancient Persia really is. The psychological portrait of Xerxes in Herodotus is used as a collection of established facts which moreover are squeezed far beyond their original extent. What is essentially a *Greek* picture of an oriental monarch is transformed, by reading into the Persian evidence this previous 'knowledge', into a description of a *Persian* king.

It is appropriate to question the whole procedure and to attempt to assess what our sources are worth. As I will argue in this paper, although Herodotus' portrayal of Xerxes is persuasive and beautifully elaborated, it contains very little that a historian could use as hard evidence for the *character* of the king and it should therefore not be used to elucidate enigmatic points in the Persian sources. Elsewhere I have discussed Xerxes' inscriptions (Sancisi-Weerdenburg 1980, ch; 1). In this paper I will concentrate on the Greek side of the story.

HERODOTUS

Herodotus, on whose information we are mostly dependent for Xerxes' reign, was hardly a contemporary of the Great King. He collected his information in the period after the Persian wars and probably after the death of Xerxes as well. It should be stressed that there is every reason to agree with Momigliano's judgment (1979: 150) of Herodotus as a historian with far more 'intellectual generosity' than any of his later fellow-Greeks. Complete impartiality is beyond any historian, but Herodotus at least made a very serious attempt to give the Persians a fair deal. He was, however, a historian and had to tell his story: he collected, organised and arranged his material. If one realises the conditions under which he accomplished this task, one cannot but admire the impressive results.

Still, as in any work of historiography, the way in which information is chosen, elaborated and inserted affects the reliability of the evidence. Herodotus

is by no means the teller of an unorganised number of stories and the indiscriminating reporter of a consecutive series of hearsay accounts. His presence as a narrator is clearly evident throughout his work, even if in some parts more markedly so than in others (Immerwahr 1977; Marincola 1987; Dewald 1987). In the light of the initial question with which Herodotus opens his work "to preserve the memory of the past by putting on record the astonishing achievements both of our own and of the Asiatic peoples; secondly and more particularly, to show how the two races came into conflict" (Hdt. I 1), the king of Persia who actually led his army to the battle with the Greeks is given an important place in the story.

Herodotus, however, is far more cautious than some of his modern commentators: Xerxes is not the only person responsible for the campaign: the course of history is not determined by personal decisions or individual actions alone. Although some persons may have more influence on what is going to happen than others, much attention is paid to factors that are beyond the grasp of individual human beings. In the discussion between Xerxes and his councillors on the plans for the campaign against Greece, it is divine intervention in the form of a dream which finally convinces Xerxes to act (VII 18). Still, because of his exalted position, the king of Persia has greater freedom of action than any of the other personalities. This, it should be realised, is Herodotus' vision: Xerxes, like the other characters in the *Histories*, are pieces on Herodotus' chessboard that he moves according to the rules, but the resulting game is Herodotus' own. To extend this metaphor, we might ask which are Herodotus' pieces, what are the rules of the game and what moves does he make to obtain the desired result.

Much attention has been paid to Herodotus' sources. There is no need to discuss this problem here in detail. Judged by the way in which Herodotus presents his information, it can be divided into roughly three kinds: a) complete tales which probably reached Herodotus as such (e.g. the Pythios story and the Masistes-tale), b) actions of Xerxes based on hearsay or on reports of eyewitnesses (e.g. Xerxes' behaviour at Abydos, at Thermopylae and during the battle of Salamis) and c) discussions of Xerxes with his advisers such as Artabanus, Demaratus, Artemisia etc. If our interest is mainly in Xerxes' personality, the value of these different types of information is rather variable. What, for instance does a novelistic tale say about the real character of one of its main actors, How well were the Greeks able to distinguish between the role of an eastern monarch, far more surrounded by ritual and ceremonial prescrip-

tions than they were accustomed to in their own surroundings, and the personality of the incumbent of the office? Does the fact that Xerxes witnessed the sea-battle at Salamis seated on his chair and not actively engaged in combat as a Greek commander might be, say anything about his character or does it rather reveal something of the role a Persian king was expected to perform?

As to the discussions between Xerxes and his chief councillors, it is clear that if eye-witnesses had been present at all, the report they might have given would have become rather distorted in the course of the fifty years between the Persian wars and the composition of the *Histories*. In these cases especially it is most likely that Herodotus directly remoulded or recreated his material. The Greek information we have of Xerxes' character thus consists of eye-witness reports which in all probability contain an ethno-centric bias: it is hard enough to judge the character and personality of someone in office within one culture, but it is nearly impossible to make similar evaluations if one does not have a solid grasp of the cultural codes and the institutionalised behaviour required in an entirely different culture.

The famous episode of Xerxes chastising the Hellespont has usually been interpreted as proof of Xerxes' violent and irascible temper: our knowledge of ritual and religious behaviour of Persian kings is so limited that the assumption of Xerxes acting out his personal anger is hazardous, even if Herodotus clearly describes Xerxes acting in such terms. But even when Herodotus explicitly mentions a Persian custom, it is often interpreted as a personal action as, for example, in the case of the human sacrifice of Amestris in VII 114².

XERXES AND WOMEN

The 'short stories' in the *Histories* in which Xerxes figures are equally problematic sources for the person of the king: they probably originated in a popular narrative tradition and there is no reason to suppose that they contain much solid evidence. It has been argued for other similar stories that the pattern was much older than the figures named in it (Lord 1970: 27). In another context, the term gene-pool of story-motifs has been used (Griffiths 1987: 37). Some of these tales contain a number of motifs that can be found in similar stories about other persons. The famous story of Xerxes' love for his niece Artaynte has some parallels in the Book of Esther (cf. Sancisi-Weerdenburg 1980: 63) and a very striking parallel in the story of Herodias (Matthew 14, 1-12). It is this tale that is responsible for Xerxes' reputation as a sensual person,

easily carried away by his passions and above all a womaniser "who was unable to control his entourage firmly" (Hignett 1963: 89). History judges easily, although it should be noted that Herodotus is more prudent than many of his later colleagues. His portrait of Xerxes is far removed from the simplistic depiction of a tyrant (Gammie 1986: 183). Herodotus shows how the king is caught in a tragic entanglement between the prescriptions of his office, the law that the king should give whatever he is asked for, and the partly unforeseen consequences of the fulfilment of this rule. One could say that Xerxes' generosity to his niece in this tale is too unreserved, but there is, as far as I can see, no element in the story which warrants a judgment of the king as an abuser of his royal power to seduce women. On the contrary, in the prologue to the most dramatic part of the story, Xerxes' infatuation with Artaynte and its subsequent disastrous results, the king uses neither threats nor violence but apparently accepts his rejection by his sister-in-law, who originally was the object of Xerxes' love. This story and this story alone has earned Xerxes the reputation of being a weakling who was controlled by the women around him. Even if the tale could be demonstrated to be a piece of historiography it seems a bit harsh to base a bad reputation on a single incident and furthermore to define it as the cause of the gradual decline of a whole empire.

There are three other incidents involving women in the recorded events of Xerxes' life: one involves his mother, two his wife. Thus, his accession to the throne is supposed to be due to the influence of Atossa, his mother. Yet, nowhere else does Herodotus mention Atossa as still alive during the later part of Xerxes' life and he gives no clue as to the relationship between mother and son. There is equally no trace in the *Histories* of the influence of queen Amestris on her husband. Rather the opposite: in the Artaynte episode she has to wait for a formal occasion to obtain the revenge she desires. Proof of her vindictive nature is rather poor: motives for human sacrifice, however abhorrent they may seem to us, are more frequently the result of religious codes than personal feelings of vanity and cruelty. Xerxes' relations with women, as reported by Herodotus, is much more a tragic story of a king caught between duty and fate, than of the lecherous monarch modern commentators have found in the Artaynte-story. In the situation described it is not so much the seductive powers of women which place Xerxes in a difficult situation, but the obligation to adhere to his royal duty and not to go back on his promise³.

XERXES' PERSONALITY IN HERODOTUS

Although Herodotus' sources clearly did not provide reliable material to analyse Xerxes' psychological development, it is very much a personality which we meet on the pages of the *Histories*. While it is a matter of debate whether the elements of Xerxes' behaviour taken together represent a gradual character-evolution, it seems beyond doubt that in his text Herodotus has modelled and sculptured the person of Xerxes. Laughter at what we know from hindsight to be inappropriate moments, marks for instance those tragic situations where Xerxes underestimates the potential consequences of his actions or orders. As Lateiner has argued: "few laughs are recorded for posterity. They are most often sub-historical non-events" (1977: 175). The main function of such laughs, which unavoidably signal disaster, is to create a pattern which "helps the account (to) carry a non-explicit interpretation" (*ibid*: 182). In other words, laughter and other non-verbal forms of communication are Herodotus' means of constructing the text in order to form a comprehensible explanation of what had happened while at the same time creating tension between the participants' observation of the events in the immediate future and historical knowledge of what really happened. At certain moments this tension is made more dramatic by explicit predictions of doom as e.g. in the Artaynte-story: "her whole family was bound to come to a bad end" (IX 109). Whatever Artaynte does, whatever Xerxes replies, disaster is forecast and inevitable. Also weeping may serve to enhance the discrepancy between helpless inaction and the course the events are to take: when Xerxes bursts into tears after his inspection of the army and fleet at Abydos (VII 45), Herodotus' description of the event and the subsequent conversation with his uncle Artabanus signals less the hybriatic monarch, than a man who is prepared to take reasonable risks and follow in the footsteps of his predecessors on the Persian throne (VII 8). Fate (δαιμονίη τις γίνεται ὁρμή) as Artabanus says, VII 18) meanwhile has decided that things will happen differently from what could be foreseen. It is only with hindsight that we know his calculations were wrong; not even a number of Greek cities at the time of Xerxes' campaign were particularly confident of Greek victory. This is not the right place to discuss the elements of Xerxes' characterisation in Herodotus' text. Very often the emphasis has been put on the Persian king's hybriatic behaviour. There are, however, several factors in his portraiture by Herodotus which add up to a tragic Xerxes, a man unable to escape fate. A further analysis

of the text and a close scrutiny of the relevant passages may result in a better understanding of Herodotus' insight into the interrelation between the destined courses of events and human interference in history. Here it is only necessary to note that the Xerxes in the *Histories* is as much a product of Herodotus' sources as of the author's conscious construction of his narrative. If we are discussing the psychology of Xerxes in Herodotus' account, we are in fact dealing with Herodotus' historical understanding and with his techniques for writing up the results of his investigations. There are at least several layers between the personality of Xerxes, as king of Persia and as commander of his armies during the Greek expedition. The uppermost of these layers is Herodotus' careful and convincing representation, which makes us feel as if we are encountering a real life personality. But we should be warned that what we read is "neither fact nor fiction but 'transfigured tradition'" (Lateiner 1987: 103⁴).

THE SOURCES FROM PERSIA

The persuasiveness of Herodotus' portrait plus the fact that centuries of historiography on the Persian empire were based on the Greek sources is probably responsible for the strange situation that the Greek evidence is used to explain puzzles in the Persian sources, which, if studied on their own merits, would not have been puzzling at all. This is most strikingly so in the case of Xerxes' inscriptions which have been studied, analysed and complemented in the certainty that the Greek sources contained 'established facts'. The *Daiva*-inscription read in this light thus presented confirmation of the fact that Xerxes who, in Herodotus' account, carefully listens to his religious advisers, as, it should be noted, a king ought, was a religious fanatic and bigot, who deviated from the famous religious tolerance practised by his predecessors. Studied on its own merits the *Daiva*-inscription shows a striking continuity with especially the last column of DB: one might conclude that instead of deviating, Xerxes' policy was a further articulation of the programme set out by his father (Sancisi-Weerdenburg 1980: 35). On the whole, the formulaic character of the inscriptions has been undervalued. Too often they are read as the personal statements of individuals, underestimating the forces of a tradition, be it a written or an oral literary one, which set certain limits to personal ideas of kings who, as seems to be generally agreed, were themselves illiterate and had at least to dictate to scribes who knew the appropriate words and phrases. Apart from the influence of our helleno-centric bias, the importance of ritual surrounding the

king's office is underestimated: kings are kings in a tradition, their office is based on continuity, their sayings are not expressions of their particular state of mind on a specific occasion as well as royal declarations of the state of affairs. When Xerxes repeats the same lines in the inscription found in 1967 in Persepolis as Darius did in the inscription on his tomb, the only possible conclusion is: this is what a Persian king ought to say, this is what Persian kingship — and not the incidental holder of the office — should look like⁵. Before assuming that two different types of evidence confirm each other, it should be analysed whether in fact they do contain the same kind of information. In the case of the Xerxes of the inscriptions and the Xerxes in Herodotus, there is no justification in using the data as complementary to each other. The inscriptions provide information on the royal ideology, the *Histories* give insight on the Greek vision of an eastern monarch. In Persian surroundings we do not find any evidence that can be used for constructing a psychological portrait of Xerxes, or of any of the other rulers of the Achaemenid empire. This is most clearly illustrated by the Persepolis and the Naqš-i Rostam reliefs and the problems caused in trying to identify the kings sculptured in various positions and in various places. If not by an accompanying inscription or by the headgear they are wearing, it is impossible to identify which king is depicted⁶. This can hardly be due to inability of the sculptors, who in all likelihood were capable of giving some individuality to a portrait if necessary or required. Again, the conclusion is justified that, if individual kings are indeed portrayed, it is above all the unchanging traditional aspects of kingship that were emphasised and expressed.

If we want to study the Achaemenid empire on its own terms, it should be approached from this angle: how are tradition and innovation reflected in the extant documentation? Before connecting processes, which had their own momentum, with the interference (or lack of action) of specific kings, it should be realised that many of the questions we have been asking show the same helleno-centric bias as our results. Seen from a Persian point of view, the reign of Xerxes may well turn out to be the glorious high point of Achaemenid history and not the moment at which decline set in.

NOTES

1. cf. Sancisi-Weerdenburg 1980: 33 for further examples.
2. cf. Legrand, comm. on Hdt. IX 109: "Amestris devait jusqu'à ses vieux jours faire preuve d'une impitoyable cruauté".
3. Flory's conclusion that Xerxes "is even less intelligent than Candaules for he twice makes dangerous promises and is unable to learn from the unfortunate results not to make the second" (1978: 152) underestimates the fact that the occasion of Amestris' request was a customary one (IX 111) and that Xerxes was compelled by law (ὕπὸ τοῦ νόμου ἐξεργόμενος). He not only could not have refused, even avoidance of the occasion was beyond his power, as Herodotus recognises.
4. Lateiner adds: "interpretation and reconstruction structure the amorphous data of every historical investigation" (*Ibid.*)
5. cf. Cook 1983: 69 on the inscriptions: "Of all the kings Darius I was much the most loquacious in his inscriptions, indeed he was even introspective. Xerxes came second to him; but a long text of his found near Persepolis in 1967 repeats *in his own name what his father had said in a very personal vein about himself* at Naqsh-i Rostam (DNb), so it may not be entirely cynical to wonder whether even his celebrated 'daiwa inscription' may not also turn out to be *less original* than has been supposed (ital. H.S.-W.). It is not at all cynical: a new copy of XPh, in the name of Xerxes or Darius would only be a missing part in the development of a royal ideology, for which, at present we have only evidence from early in Darius' reign and from Xerxes' reign. Cook's verdict stems from a mistaken belief in the individual character of the texts, which in turn depends on the fact that the Greek sources portray the kings as individual human beings. Even an Iranist such as Frye (1983: 121) thus comes to the following statement on XPh: "Only Xerxes among the Achaemenid kings showed strong feelings about religion".
6. As e.g. in the case of the Treasury-reliefs. Porada (1985: 816-9) sees Darius as the enthroned king, mainly for stylistic reasons, against Von Gall (1974: 148ff.) who has pointed out that the king on the throne does not have the crown with crenelations which is characteristic for Darius.

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