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In Search of Xerxes: Images of the Persian King

Emma Elizabeth Clough

Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Department of Classics and Ancient History,

University of Durham

2003

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ABSTRACT

In Search of Xerxes: Images of the Persian King

Thesis submitted by Emma Elizabeth Clough for the degree of Ph.D. in the Department of Classics and Ancient History at the University of Durham in 2003.

The figure of Xerxes, the Persian king who invaded Greece in 480 BC, is known to us primarily through Greek sources and the western inheritors of the Greek tradition. Little Persian evidence from Xerxes' reign survives and our perceptions are, therefore, informed by the image of the king constructed by his enemies whose experience of the Persian Wars was a key moment in their own self-definition. As a result, Xerxes is perceived as the antithesis of all that the Greeks represented: the barbarian despot, a figure to be both feared and mocked. This leads to the marginalisation – both literal and symbolic – of the king even in sources where we might expect him to play a key role in the Persian Wars narrative. My thesis examines the creation and perpetuation of a cultural repertoire within which Xerxes is othered and deprived of a subjective voice. After an examination of the scant Persian evidence for Xerxes' reign, it considers the Greek sources of the fifth and fourth centuries BC, beginning with Aeschylus and Herodotus and moving into discussion of the diverse presentations of Timotheus, Ctesias and the orators and philosophers of fourth-century Athens. Later Greek sources – primarily Diodorus and Josephus – are then studied, before an analysis of the Xerxes-traditions in Roman thought. Finally the figure of Xerxes in Greek writing of the second sophistic period is considered.

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NOTE ON TRANSLATIONS AND ABBREVIATIONS

All translations are my own, unless otherwise stated.

Standard abbreviations are used for ancient authors and texts, as well as for modern collections of texts.

Abbreviations of journal titles are as in *L'Année Philologique*, except that 'P' has been substituted for 'Ph', in accordance with Anglophone usage.

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The roots of my enthusiasm for things classical were, however, first planted by Ken Parham at Durham Sixth Form Centre, and later nurtured at Brasenose College, Oxford by Ed Bispham, Llewelyn Morgan, the late Leighton Reynolds, and Greg Woolf. I am indebted to each of them for their faith in me, and can only hope that the present work proves that faith justified.

My parents, Terry and Margaret Clough, deserve a greater share of the credit for the completion of this work than their modesty would allow them to accept; they have been an unfailing source of love and support throughout. Finally, to David Bridges, for whom Xerxes must often have seemed to be the 'other man' in my life – thank you for helping me to fly.

INTRODUCTION

In Search of Xerxes

On 9th April 2003 the world witnessed one of the most striking images of recent years. In a gesture of triumph US troops in Baghdad's central square toppled a giant statue of the former Iraqi dictator, Saddam Hussein, from the plinth on which it stood. Exhilarated crowds of waiting Iraqi citizens added their own expressions of contempt for the recently ousted leader, pelting the statue with stones and treading upon the smashed figure. The scene was a reflection of others seen all over Iraq, where posters featuring Saddam were defaced with slogans, statues riddled with bullet-holes, and his royal palaces and headquarters – once significant as centres of his power and wealth – were bombed and looted.

The symbolism of these actions is not difficult to interpret. By defacing and destroying physical representations of the hated oppressor, troops and civilians attempted to erase all trace of the tyrant who had terrorised his own people and who was said to be a threat to world stability. This was *damnatio memoriae* in action; newspapers and television broadcasts made sure that the whole world saw it happen. Saddam Hussein was presented as the antithesis of all that civilisation represents – a brutal and torturous dictator who would stop at nothing in his pursuit of power. Tellingly, the US-led campaign to bring him down was labelled 'Operation Iraqi Freedom'; the coalition forces were presented as upholders of liberty, justice and moral rectitude.

As the opponent of all that is 'right' and 'good', Saddam Hussein is a latter-day representative of the ideological construction of 'self' and 'other' which has its ancient counterpart in a war which took place almost two and a half thousand years ago. For the ancient Greeks, the universal enemy who came to represent a threat to Hellenic culture was Xerxes, the Persian despot who, in an attempt to deprive her of her freedom, invaded Greece in 480 BC. His invasion was to be a defining moment in the creation of the Greeks' own identity. Whilst the circumstances of the 2003 'war on terror' and Xerxes' campaign of 480/479 BC differ in many ways – not least in that Xerxes headed an aggressive invasion, whilst Saddam's own territory was attacked – the cultural responses to the two, in which the enemy leader has been symbolically effaced, are strikingly similar. The invasion of Greece by Xerxes sparked a tradition which was to continue for centuries, and at first glance the king appears to be an all-pervasive presence in ancient literature dealing with the Persian Wars. On closer inspection, however, it will become clear that Xerxes has himself been obliterated to a degree which is far more extreme than anything yet inflicted on the figure of Saddam Hussein.

In contrast to the scenes in Baghdad in 2003, the destruction of the physical symbols of Xerxes' reign did not take place until long after his death, with Alexander the Great's invasion of Persia and destruction of Persepolis. Already by that time, however, a cultural repertoire had been established in which Xerxes, by means of various strategies, was consistently demonised, othered, and banished to the very fringes of discourse relating to his invasion of Greece. The process had begun in the 470s BC, with the dramatic productions of Phrynichus and Aeschylus in the immediate aftermath of the Greeks' victory, and was to

continue for centuries, with western inheritors of the Xerxes-tradition buying wholeheartedly into the orientalising ideology. The process is one which continues even today. The fact that the perpetuation of the Persian Wars tradition was monopolised by the Greek victors – no insight on the invasion from the Persian viewpoint has survived – has meant that no alternative to this obliteration of an objective perspective is available to us.

The way in which western intellectuals think about the east was changed for ever by Edward Said's groundbreaking work, *Orientalism* (1978), in which he examined the ideological construction of the Orient by the West. It is a sad irony that Said himself died a week before this thesis was completed. Although his study was based primarily upon post-colonial imperialist narratives, he identified Aeschylus' *Persae* as a foundation text of orientalism, writing that in this play 'It is Europe that articulates the Orient; this articulation is the prerogative, not of a puppet master, but of a genuine creator, whose life-giving power represents, animates, constitutes the otherwise silent and dangerous space beyond familiar boundaries' (p. 57). The observation is one which can be applied to every Greek ideological construction of the figure of Xerxes himself.

The significance of the Persian Wars in relation to Hellenic ethnic self-consciousness has been much-discussed since the publication of Edith Hall's *Inventing the Barbarian* in 1989, and several studies have dealt with the formulation of Greek identities in relation to particular texts or genres – for example, Hartog's *The Mirror of Herodotus* (1988), Harrison's *The Emptiness of Asia* (2000), on Aeschylus' *Persae*, and Loraux's 1986 study of the conventions

of the funeral oration, *The Invention of Athens*. Meanwhile, Miller's *Athens and Persia* (1997) examines the cultural impact of contact with Persia on Athens itself. The figure of the Persian king resurfaces on occasion in all of these works, yet scholarship has so far neglected to produce an exploration of the way in which the reception of Xerxes himself has been shaped by responses to the Persian invasion. Works which do deal specifically with Xerxes – Hignett's *Xerxes' Invasion of Greece* (1963) and Burn's 1984 *Persia and the Greeks*, for example – tend to view his expedition from a largely historical perspective, although recently Pierre Briant's hugely valuable contribution to Achaemenid studies, *From Cyrus to Alexander* (English translation 2002) has paved the way for an approach which considers the ideological factors contributing to the way in which the ancient source material constructs the figure of the Persian king, rather than seeking simply to extract historical 'fact' from the ancient narratives.

Whilst the brilliant work of Heleen Sancisi-Weerdenburg has examined aspects of the presentation of the king with an eye to the orientalising ideology of the Greek sources[1] there remains a need for a diachronic study which looks at the cultural construction of the image of Xerxes as a continuous process throughout antiquity, considering the varying generic and historical agendas of authors influenced by the Xerxes-traditions. As I will argue here, those traditions are the literary equivalent of the modern-day destruction of Saddam Hussein's statue. My search for the Persian king is one which will result not in the discovery of the 'real' Xerxes – nor does it purport to attempt such a feat – but which will, I hope, bring to light a remarkable process of cultural *damnatio memoriae*.

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[1] See especially Sancisi-Weerdenburg 1987 (a), 1989 and 1999.

CHAPTER ONE

Xerxes In His Own Write? The Persian Evidence

It is by now well-acknowledged that our understanding of Xerxes is limited almost entirely to what we are told by sources originating from outside the Persian empire. Their primary concern is the king's humiliating defeat at the hands of the Greeks, and we are therefore forced to try to reconstruct events from the point of view of the victors – never was the old cliché that history is always told by the winners more true than in this instance. Before embarking upon an analysis of the Greek and later western traditions surrounding the figure of the Persian king, however, an insight into what little evidence does remain from the Persian side of events is crucial. We must ask whether it is possible to see beyond the portrayal of Xerxes by the triumphant defenders of Greece, and examine whether the limited Persian sources from the period of his reign contribute anything which can help to produce an image of the 'real' Xerxes.

From the reign of Xerxes we have no personal records, no diary, not even a comprehensive inscription detailing his life's works. Nor has any sort of chronicle written by a contemporary Persian survived (or even one composed after the king's death) giving an account of his life from the perspective of an 'insider'; we are therefore left to deduce what we can from the inscriptions, building works and reliefs which remain from his reign. As noted by Briant (2002, p. 518), there is a significant reduction in the number of available sources on the Persian empire from the reign of Xerxes on; far fewer Babylonian and Egyptian documents have survived than from previous periods, and the

archaeological evidence, the Persepolis treasury tablets[1] and the royal inscriptions tell us only about the building activities of Xerxes.

The situation is complicated too by the modern historiographical tradition relating to the interpretation of Xerxes' inscriptions. As Sancisi-Weerdenburg has pointed out, scholars have too often tended to seek confirmation in the Persian sources for what they 'know' of Xerxes' reign from the Greek sources. She gives the following enlightening example: 'If we know from a (clearly novelistic) tale in the *Histories* that Xerxes had a love-affair...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'.[2] Of course this then has implications for the interpretation of Xerxes as an intolerant and brutal tyrant, as contrasted with the less extreme picture of his father presented by Aeschylus, for example.[3] This tendency to look from the outside in, rather than to begin with the Persian material, is the result of centuries of conditioning and is hard to undo. This chapter will ask whether it is possible to hear the voice of Xerxes himself in the Persian sources.

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[1] The Persepolis treasury tablets detail payments for labourers working at the site. For those which date from the reign of Xerxes see Cameron 1948, pp. 98-191 (nos. 10-75). The documents can shed little light on the figure of the king himself; as Cameron (p. 9) writes, 'Contrary to expectations, the documents from the treasury of the royal city of Persepolis...are not of a political nature. There are no treaties, chronicles, annals, letters to or from satraps, or edicts to distant outposts of the realm. Instead, they are specifically "Treasury" documents'.

[2] Sancisi-Weerdenburg 1989, p. 551. Root 1979, pp. 101-3 describes the 'harem' of Xerxes and notes that it has been labelled as such only because the building is located in a relatively secluded position on a low level of the terrace, and because it has a series of identical small compartments in its western extension. There is no independent Persian testimony to corroborate this view.

[3] See below, pp. 44-7.

Darius and the 'creation' of an Achaemenid ideology

Xerxes' father Darius has left us with far more inside evidence from his reign than his successor; it is a necessary preliminary to any study of Xerxes' inscriptions that we must take a brief look at those of Darius in order to give us an insight into the traditions within which Xerxes was working. Darius has left us with an account of the events early in his reign; this appears in the form of an extensive inscription and reliefs found high on a rock face at Behistun. Alongside this numerous other inscriptions from Darius' capital Persepolis and his tomb at Naqš-i Rustam have survived, as well as a vast quantity of written materials in the form of the Persepolis fortification tablets; these record economic transactions, court accounts and private correspondence.[4] Like the treasury tablets of Xerxes' reign, these give a fascinating insight into the economic workings of the Persian empire but shed little light on the figure of the king himself.

It appears from the inscriptional evidence which remains that Darius laid claim to the creation of a new ideology of Achaemenid kingship. Darius was not, of course a descendant of his predecessors Cyrus and Cambyses but, as the Behistun inscription records,[5] had succeeded to the Persian throne after overthrowing a usurper. In order to establish himself and his descendants on that throne he seems to have invented ways of justifying his position. Thus he combined an allegiance to the traditions of the past with innovations in his style

[4] Hallock 1969, pp. 13-69 summarises the content of the Persepolis fortification tablets.
[5] DB 1.26-61. For inscriptions discussed and translations quoted in this chapter, see Kent 1953; the only exception is XPl, which was discovered after Kent's volume was published. For XPl, see Gharib 1968 and Kuhrt 1995, p. 681.

of kingship. For example, Darius' inscriptions used many of the traditional formulae found in earlier Near Eastern texts, and his administrative records continued to use the Elamite language;[6] he also stresses in the Behistun inscription his link with the Achaemenid dynasty, citing his genealogy as evidence that, like Cyrus, he could claim a familial link with the eponymous founder Achaemenes and commenting that 'For this reason we are called Achaemenians. From long ago we have been noble. From long ago our family had been kings.'[7] These assertions of continuity, however, were accompanied by several important innovations. Most obviously, Darius founded a new capital at Persepolis, instead of using Cyrus' capital, Pasargadae. Where the inscriptions were concerned, Darius continued to use the Elamite and Babylonian languages but also added what we now know as Old Persian to make his writings trilingual. It is even thought that he may have claimed to have been the inventor of this language.[8] The repeated invocation of the god Ahuramazda in the inscriptions also seems to have been one of Darius' own particular contributions to the official ideology of the Achaemenid dynasty.

It must be stressed here that any of the royal inscriptions cannot necessarily be taken as evidence for an individual king's personality; they represent the official line, and as such are carefully manufactured pieces of propaganda, designed to project a particular image. This will become crucial when we come to investigate the inscriptional evidence from Xerxes' reign. In spite of this, however, Darius'

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[6] On these examples of continuity with the past see Cameron 1955, pp. 87-8.
[7] DB 1.1-8.
[8] DB 4.88-92. This interpretation rests on the translation of the word *dipīmaiy* as meaning 'script', rather than the inscription itself. See Sancisi-Weerdenburg 1999, p. 92 for a lucid summary of the evidence; she writes that, 'Most...now seem to agree that Darius referred to the script and had given orders to create a new type of writing for his own language'.

Behistun inscription does come far closer to presenting an inside account of the events of his reign than anything found from the reign of Xerxes. The inscription consists of five columns, totalling four hundred and fourteen lines of text, which report the events of the first three years of Darius' reign, describing his accession to the throne and the resistance he overcame, listing the provinces over which he gained control and including the names of individuals who took part as well as the locations of battles, and the months in which these took place. All of this was, of course, accomplished by the favour of the supreme god, Ahuramazda; Darius is said to be a follower of the 'true' (that is, Persian) way and to be opposed to all those who follow the Lie (apparently defined primarily as the rejection of Ahuramazda). The inscription was accompanied by a relief depicting Darius as receiving the submission of individuals representing the countries which he had subdued, and observed by the winged figure of Ahuramazda hovering above.

In the light of the specific information which it gives, and the apparent attention to chronology, cause and effect, the Behistun inscription has been seen as 'the only text in old-Persian that is usually understood as a historiographical text'.[9] Although several of Darius' other inscriptions make reference to the areas over which the king ruled,[10] these do not give specific details which allow us to locate events in their historical context. Other documents refer to building works[11] or restate the ideology of the Achaemenid dynasty in general terms, referring to the protection of Ahuramazda and Darius' commitment to maintaining the true way

[9] Sancisi-Weerdenburg 1999, p. 93.
[10] DPe, DPh, DNa.
[11] DPa, DSf, DSj, DSo, DZc.

and opposing the Lie.[12] As we shall see, the inscriptions of Xerxes follow a very similar pattern.

Like father, like son

Like the inscriptions of his father, those of Xerxes are all written in the first person, as though the king himself were speaking. This use of the 'I' voice might at first suggest that we have the authentic and personal pronouncements of Xerxes himself. It soon becomes clear that, as with Darius, the issue is not so straightforward; here the sense that we are reading not individualised statements by a particular king but formulaic ideological proclamations is even more extreme. Of the inscriptions which survive, several consist only of one or two lines and were found on small items such as cylinder seals or other objects made from metal or precious stone. XPi, for example, comes from a small object made of lapis lazuli and reads simply 'Doorknob of precious stone, made in the house of Xerxes the king'; XH was inscribed on a silver pitcher and says that it was 'made in the house of Xerxes the king'. Obviously such items, which declare only their origin and ownership, are of little use in helping us to learn much of Xerxes himself, and so I shall concentrate on the longer inscriptions which have been found on buildings. The majority of these extended inscriptions have been found in the palace complex at Persepolis, and tend to refer primarily to Xerxes' building activities. They are written in the cuneiform script of Old Persian and, like Darius' works, are usually accompanied by translations into other languages – Elamite and Akkadian. One inscription, however, stands out in that it is

[12] DPd, DNb, DSj, DSk, DSs.

concerned not with building works but with the figure of the king himself. This was found near Persepolis in 1967 and is now denoted as XPl. A translation of the text reads as follows:

> A great god is Ahuramazda who created this excellent work which one sees; who created happiness for man; who bestowed wisdom and energy upon Xerxes the king. Says Xerxes the king: by the favour of Ahuramazda I am of such a kind that I am a friend to what is right, I am no friend to what is wrong.
>
> It is not my wish that to the weak is done wrong because of the mighty, it is not my wish that the weak is hurt because of the mighty, that the mighty is hurt because of the weak. What is right, that is my wish. I am no friend of the man who is a follower of the lie. I am not hot-tempered. When I feel anger rising, I keep that under control by my thinking power. I control firmly my impulses.
>
> The man who co-operates, him do I reward according to his co-operation. He who does harm, him I punish according to the damage. It is not my wish that a man does harm, it is certainly not my wish that a man if he causes damage be not punished. What a man says against a man, that does not convince me, until I have heard testimony (?) from both parties. What a man does or performs according to his powers, satisfies me, therewith I am satisfied and it gives me great pleasure and I am very satisfied and I give much to faithful men.
>
> I am trained with both hands and feet. As a horseman I am a good horseman. As a bowman I am a good bowman, both afoot and on horseback. As a spearman I am a good spearman, both afoot and on

> horseback. And the skills which Ahuramazda has bestowed upon me and I have had the strength to use them, by the favour of Ahuramazda, what has been done by me, I have done with these skills which Ahuramazda has bestowed upon me.[13]

Here we are presented with a portrait of a king who apparently perceives himself as favoured by the supreme god, Ahuramazda. He shows himself to be concerned to maintain this relationship by acknowledging the god's role both in his own fortunes and in the creation of the building upon which the inscription was carved, and also by denouncing anyone who follows the 'Lie', that is, who rejects Ahuramazda. Xerxes' self-image here is one of a just and upright ruler, who seeks fairness for his subjects, whether weak or strong. Furthermore, he gives us an insight, it seems, into his own perceptions of his personality – he is a man of self-control rather than rash impulse, yet at the same time he does not suffer gladly those who fail to display their loyalty to him as king. Finally, we are presented with a king who is trained in the arts of war – horsemanship, and the use of the bow and the spear.

It seems too good to be true; here we have what looks like a personal 'mission statement' of the king, a stone speaking to us in the very words of Xerxes himself, and giving us an insight, which has been denied to us by the Greek sources, into the mind of the ruler. Were this inscription to exist in isolation, we might well be content that we had at last found something to present the king's own point of view. This is not, however, the case. A mere superficial glance at the evidence reveals that this is no original manifesto designed to assert this

[13] The translation used here is that of Kuhrt 1995, p. 681.

king's individuality. Far from it; in fact, the inscription is an almost verbatim repetition of one created by Xerxes' father Darius, that which is now denoted as DNb, and which was found on Darius' tomb at Naqš-i Rustam. The name 'Darius' has been replaced by 'Xerxes', and little else has been altered.[14]

Rather than being evidence for an individual king's personality – or at least for the image of himself which he desired to project to the public – the inscription of Xerxes thus takes on new meaning as a statement emphasising continuity with the past, so much so that the words of that past have not even been adapted by the new king. By using the wording of his father's inscription, Xerxes was stressing the strength of his link with the Achaemenid dynasty, announcing to his readers that he was following on from his father's rule and demonstrating his allegiance to the traditions of the past. As Kuhrt (1995, p. 681) has noted, 'The fact that both kings had the same text inscribed *verbatim* shows that the sentiments expressed central and eternal tenets of Persian kingship – not the character traits of an individual monarch'. Xerxes, then, was laying claim to the characteristics which he was *expected* to possess, rather than giving an insight into his true personality.

The association of successor and predecessor seems to have begun to have been cultivated even during Darius' own reign, before the accession of Xerxes to the throne. Here the artistic evidence is helpful. A relief,[15] originally thought to be from Darius' palace at Persepolis, and later moved to the treasury there, depicts

[14] Gharib 1968 presents a comparison of the language of XPl and DNb; the differences are mainly grammatical and he suggests that both may have been copied from the same original draft (p. 55).
[15] See Root 1979, plate XVII (= Boardman 2000, fig. 4.13).

Darius, seated and surrounded by attendants. His crown prince stands behind him. The relationship of the two figures is indicated by the similarity of the garments they wear, their beards and crowns; the heir to the throne is facially almost an exact carbon copy of his father. This figure, standing behind the throne, can be identified as royalty also by the fact that he is, like Darius, raised slightly upon a pedestal and his relative height differentiates him from the other surrounding figures. This is an image also found elsewhere on the palace remains at Persepolis, notably on door jambs.[16] The heir to the throne was thus presented as personifying a continuation of his father's rule even before he took up his role as king. The point is even more noteworthy if we consider that there appears to have been some question over the inheritor of the Persian throne; one of Xerxes' inscriptions alludes to this by noting that Darius had other sons, but that he was chosen as the favourite.[17] Even when there may have been some debate as to the identity of the king's successor, this did not matter in terms of artistic representation. These images are not intended as realistic portraits depicting an individual's characteristics, but rather are stylised depictions of the ideal Persian king; in this sense they work in exactly the same way as the formulaic inscriptions. As Sancisi-Weerdenburg (1989, p. 558) has pointed out, the problems caused in trying to identify the various kings on the reliefs illustrates this point well: 'if individual kings are indeed portrayed, it is above all the unchanging traditional aspects of kingship that were emphasised and expressed'.

[16] For example Root 1979, plate XXVa, and Boardman 2000, fig. 4.16.
[17] XPf 27-35. Herodotus (7.2-3) also suggests that the issue of the succession was subject to dispute.

This emphasis on continuity with his father's reign manifests itself in a number of ways in several of Xerxes' other inscriptions. One very simple way in which the father-son link is stressed is for Xerxes to refer to himself explicitly as 'son of Darius', or to make mention of 'my father Darius'; this is a method which is adopted in the majority of the surviving inscriptions.[18] As mentioned earlier, one of the inscriptions, XPf, also makes specific mention of the succession question and thus stresses the king's familial links:

> Saith Xerxes the King: My father was Darius; Darius' father was Hystaspes by name; Hystaspes' father was Arsames by name. Both Hystaspes and Arsames were both living, at that time – thus unto Ahuramazda was the desire – Darius, who was my father, him he made king in this earth. When Darius became king, he built much excellent (construction).
>
> Saith Xerxes the King: Other sons of Darius there were, (but) – thus unto Ahuramazda was the desire – Darius my father made me the greatest after himself.
>
> When my father Darius went away from the throne, by the will of Ahuramazda I became king on my father's throne. When I became king, I built much excellent (construction). What had been built by my father, that I protected, and other building I added. What moreover I built, and what my father built, all that by the favour of Ahuramazda we built.[19]

By giving his genealogy here, Xerxes emphasises his connection with the past; he alludes also to the unusual nature of his father's accession to the throne by noting that both Darius' father and his grandfather were still alive when he

---

[18] See XPa 9-10, XPb 19, XPc 11, XPd 13, XPe 3, XPf 13-14, XPg 6, XPh 11, XPj 3, XPk 1, XSa 2, XSc 2, XE 19, XV 17.
[19] XPf 15-43.

became king. Xerxes stresses too that he was his own father's favourite for the succession and in this way underlines the legitimacy of his own position. Of course, he notes repeatedly, all of this was accomplished too with the approval and help of the Achaemenids' supreme god, Ahuramazda; in referring to this as well Xerxes reinforces his bonds with the dynasty. Briant (2002, p. 520) has also pointed out in relation to this inscription that, in contrast to the account of the succession given by Herodotus (7.2-3), Xerxes makes no mention here of the influence of his mother Atossa in determining the succession; he suggests that, had she exercised the sort of power claimed for her by the Greek historian, Xerxes could not have failed to note it here. Whether it is likely that an official Persian account would have mentioned such influence does seem questionable, but this nonetheless provides us with an example of one of the ways in which Greek sources have selected their material to give a negative slant on Xerxes' reign; in this case they often choose to build up a picture of the Persian king as subject to the manipulation of the women at his court.

Significantly in this inscription too, Xerxes refers to the building works undertaken by his father and by himself. Once more the stress is on continuity; this king is finishing what his father started. As many of Xerxes' other inscriptions have been found on his building works they are often similar to this one in noting that these architectural projects are an extension of those initiated by Darius. XPg 3-14, for example, from a plaque from a palace wall at Persepolis, explicitly states that 'By the favour of Ahuramazda, King Darius my father built and ordered (to be built) much good (construction). By the favour also of Ahuramazda I added to that construction and built further (buildings).'

Similarly, XPa 11-17 claims that the building of Persepolis was a project jointly carried out by Xerxes and his father: 'By the favour of Ahuramazda, this Colonnade of All Lands I built. Much other good (construction) was built within this (city) Persepolis, which I built and which my father built. Whatever good construction is seen, all that by the favour of Ahuramazda we built.' Once again we see what appears to be a conscious effort on Xerxes' part to align himself with the positive aspects of his father's reign and to place himself in the dynastic line; this king becomes an extension of Darius.

The archaeological evidence from Susa has shown that there too, as well as in Persepolis, Xerxes continued with his father's work; a recently-found inscription (XSd) confirms that he was responsible for the completion of the Darius gate there. The pattern is followed on the one inscription of Xerxes found outside Iran, at Lake Van in eastern Turkey, too: there, Xerxes declares: 'King Darius, who was my father – he by the favour of Ahuramazda built much good (construction), and this niche he gave orders to dig out, where he did not cause an inscription to be engraved. Afterwards, I gave order to engrave this inscription' (XV 16-27). Again, Xerxes shows that he has continued where his father left off. As Briant (2002, p. 254) has pointed out, references to buildings that are exclusively Xerxes' own are rare.

Just as Xerxes adopted and built upon the physical structures created during the reign of his father he also took the words inscribed upon those buildings and made use of them in his own inscriptions. The wholesale appropriation which we saw in XPl is the most extreme case, although elsewhere lengthy formulaic

chunks are extracted from the inscriptions of Darius for use in those of his son. Often Xerxes simply replaces the name of his father with his own name, using in particular the religious invocations of Ahuramazda, and the royal titles 'the Great King, King of Kings, King of countries containing all kinds of men, King in this great earth far and wide'. These formulae feature repeatedly in Xerxes' own inscriptions, so that a large proportion of each usually simply repeats the words of Darius.[20] These formulae are usually very similar in format to the opening words of Darius on the royal tomb at Naqš-i Rustam (DNa). The first fifteen lines of that inscription read as follows:

> A great god is Ahuramazda, who created this earth, who created yonder sky, who created man, who created happiness for man, who made Darius king, one king of many, one lord of many.
>
> I am Darius the Great King, King of Kings, King of countries containing all kinds of men, King in this great earth far and wide, son of Hystaspes, an Achaemenian, a Persian, son of a Persian, an Aryan, having Aryan lineage.

Xerxes' inscriptions frequently appropriate this section of the inscription, simply adapting it to make it relevant to Xerxes himself rather than to Darius. By using the very words of his father, making the same links with Ahuramazda, and appropriating the same royal titles Xerxes was again able to create an impression of continuity, thus appearing to give further legitimacy to his own power.

If the traditions of the Achaemenid dynasty were to some extent invented by Darius, then, it appears that his son took upon himself the initial responsibility of maintaining them. In doing so he was only one of many Persian kings who

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[20] See, for example, XPa 1-11, XPb 1-21, XPc 1-9, XPd 1-14, Xpe, XPf 1-15, XPh 1-13, XV1-16.

followed on from Darius' lead. Later inscriptions of the successors of Xerxes demonstrate that they too went on to utilise the formulae established by Darius. An inscription of Artaxerxes I found at Persepolis (A^1Pa), for example, utilises the formulaic references to Ahuramazda and describes this king as 'son of Xerxes the king, grandson of Darius the king'. Whilst Darius was rare in that he created a new ideology for his dynasty it should be stressed that Xerxes was far from unique in simply taking this over for his own rule. Darius II, successor of Artaxerxes, went on to employ the same formulae; D^2Sb, for example, appropriates the list of royal titles used by this king's predecessors, as well as announcing that he built a palace by the favour of Ahuramazda and in continuation of the work of his own father. The practice of stressing such links with the past continues too in the extant inscriptions of Artaxerxes II and Artaxerxes III.

The evidence so far, then, appears to suggest Xerxes' intention to consolidate Darius' rule; with these inscriptions the Persian king proclaims his intent to live up to the standards set by his father and to maintain the stability of the Achaemenid royal rule. One inscription, however, has been seen in the past as offering a possible exception to these ideological resemblances between Xerxes and Darius. The so-called *daiva*-inscription from Persepolis (XPh) features the only country-list found in anywhere in Xerxes' inscriptions, and refers to a revolt among one of these countries. Ahuramazda, says Xerxes, helped him to restore order in that country. He then speaks of a place where *daiva*, false gods, or demons, were being worshipped; he, however, put a stop to this by destroying the sanctuary of the false gods and instituting the worship of Ahuramazda and Arta

(the true – that is, Persian – way). All of this was, of course, accomplished as a result of the favour of Ahuramazda. As this is a crucial text in the debate on the character of Xerxes, it is worth quoting in full:

> A great god is Ahuramazda, who created this earth, who created yonder sky, who created man, who created happiness for man, made Xerxes king, one king of many, one lord of many. I am Xerxes the Great King, King of Kings, King of countries containing all kinds of men, King in this great earth far and wide, son of King Darius, an Achaemenian, a Persian, son of a Persian, an Aryan, having Aryan lineage.
>
> Saith Xerxes the King: By the favour of Ahuramazda these are the countries of which I was king, these are the countries which I seized outside of Persia; I ruled over them; they bore tribute to me; what was said to them by me, that they did; my law – that held them firm; Media, Elam, Arachosia, Armenia, Drangiana, Parthia, Aria, Bactria, Sogdiana, Chorasmia, Babylonia, Assyria, Sattagydia, Sardis, Egypt, Ionians, those who dwell by the sea and those who dwell across the sea, men of Maka, Arabia, Gandara, Sind, Cappadocia, Dahae, Amyrgian Scythians, Pointed-Cap Scythians, Skudra, men of Akaufaka, Libyans, Carians, Ethiopians.
>
> Saith Xerxes the King: When that I became king, there is among these countries which are inscribed above (one which) was in commotion. Afterward Ahuramazda bore me aid; by the favour of Ahuramazda I smote that country and put it down in its place.
>
> And among these countries there was (a place) where previously false gods were worshipped. Afterwards, by the favour of Ahuramazda, I destroyed that sanctuary of the demons, and I made a proclamation, "The demons

shall not be worshipped!" Where previously the demons were worshipped, there I worshipped Ahuramazda and Arta reverent(ly).

And there was other (business) that had been done ill; that I made good. That which I did, all I did by the favour of Ahuramazda. Ahuramazda bore me aid, until I completed the work.

Thou who (shalt be) hereafter, if thou shalt think, "Happy may I be when living, and when dead may I be blessed, "have respect for that law which Ahuramazda has established; worship Ahuramazda and Arta reverent(ly).

The man who has respect for that law which Ahuramazda has established, and worships Ahuramazda and Arta reverent(ly), he both becomes happy while living, and becomes blessed when dead.

Saith Xerxes the King: Me may Ahuramazda protect from harm, and my royal house, and this land: this I pray of Ahuramazda, this may Ahuramazda give to me!

This inscription has been used by historians as proof that Xerxes broke with his father's supposed policy of tolerance by becoming more despotic and persecuting followers of religions other than his own. To the list of his negative characteristics – weakness, immorality and cruelty – this inscription has been thought to add evidence of his bigotry. Once again preconceived ideas based on the hostile Greek sources are to blame for this reading of the inscription. The idea that Xerxes' behaviour was more extreme than that of his father can be traced back as far as Aeschylus' *Persae*, where the younger king is criticised for his youthful rashness and compared unfavourably to the dead Darius (see below, pp. 44-7).

Taken from the Persian viewpoint, however, the *daiva*-inscription suggests nothing which had not been precedented in Darius' reign. On a superficial level, this is another of the inscriptions which, in its opening lines, relies heavily upon the words of Darius (as written in DNa and quoted above, p. 18); here the closing lines of Xerxes' inscription too repeat those of his father's tomb inscription. Perhaps even more importantly, however, the country-list is very similar to that of DNa; Xerxes lists them in a slightly different order, and adds the men of Dahae and Akaufaka to Darius' list, but the idea of listing tribute-paying subjects is nothing new. There is also one subtle difference in the wording of the two inscriptions here; Xerxes' is less aggressive, in that he adds, 'These are the countries of which I was king', where his father's inscription had read only, 'these are the countries which I seized outside of Persia' (DNa 16-18). Here Xerxes' words actually stress continuity with his father's reign by implying that he inherited some of the countries over which he was king rather than seizing them by force.

The main point which has been adduced to demonstrate Xerxes' intolerance is the reference here to his suppression of rebellion. This in itself is again no radical new policy; the very context of Darius' Behistun inscription, as we saw earlier, was to report in particular the termination of various insurrections and to give specific details of these actions. As for Xerxes' supposed religious intolerance, again his behaviour seen here is no more extreme than that of his father. At one point in the Behistun inscription (DB 5.1-12) Darius describes the revolt and suppression of the Elamites; he then goes on to explain his actions by commenting that, 'The Elamites were faithless and by them Ahuramazda was not

worshipped. I worshipped Ahuramazda; by the favour of Ahuramazda, as was my desire, thus I did unto them.' The implication here is that one aspect of this rebellion was the failure to recognise the Persian religion; Darius, like his son, thus claimed to be the upholder of the laws of Ahuramazda, denouncing those who followed the Lie and were therefore the opponents of Arta.

Xerxes' *daiva*-inscription, then, appears to show this king as following on from where his father left off. Unlike the Behistun inscription, however, this gives no specific details which enable the historian to pinpoint the date and location of the events to which Xerxes refers. In view of this timelessness it cannot, therefore, be viewed as a straightforward historiographical document; rather it is to be seen as another ideological assertion of the issues which ought to concern an Achaemenid king. Briant (2002, p. 553) writes that this inscription of Xerxes is 'intended to illustrate the permanence of his power and the transcendence of his royal virtues'. In this case the points for concern are shown to be the maintenance of loyalty to himself and Ahuramazda by his subject peoples, and the upholding of Arta rather than the Lie. The ultimate message seems to be that rebellion from the Persian King equals a denial of the Persian god, Ahuramazda. Tradition has thus been re-stated once more.

Ultimately, then, if we are seeking from any of these inscriptions a continuous narrative of Xerxes' reign, we shall remain unsatisfied; likewise, we shall be disappointed if we want to gain an insight into the private thoughts and personality of the man behind the tyrannical image which has been portrayed by western sources since his invasion of Greece. It is clear that there is little here to

individualise the king; we might say that from many of the inscriptions he appears as a virtual carbon copy of his father, in much the same way in which the heir to the throne was depicted on Darius' reliefs. This conscious association of successor and predecessor consolidates the traditional aspects of Achaemenid rule, and, as we have noted, Xerxes was doing what his own successors would continue to do in generations to come; we might say that, in the case of Xerxes, this king at least took a positive decision to present himself as a carbon copy of his father, whilst his own heirs must have were simply following on from this tradition of inheritance which had been established for them. Whilst there emerges from the inscriptional evidence, however, a fascinating insight into the creation and maintenance of a Persian royal ideology, the question of who Xerxes was still remains; what we possess here is not the king's own personal voice but that of royal tradition. The Xerxes we find here is just as much of a construction as the Xerxes of western sources derived from the post-Persian Wars Greek traditions. The lack of inside evidence makes it unsurprising that even Iranologists have their perceptions informed by Greek historiographical prejudices. Consequently the 'real' Xerxes does not have even a remote chance of having his voice heard.

CHAPTER TWO

An Absent Presence: Aeschylus' Xerxes

Celebration and commemoration: the background

The repulse of Persian forces from Greece in 490 and 480-79 BC generated a whole series of cultural and artistic reactions which were to be the origins of traditions still alive today. Never before had the mainland Greeks been confronted with a barbarian invader who presented a direct threat to their lives and their homeland. The repulse of this force, after two separate invasions, provided the impetus for a process of memorialisation which was to have an impact upon art and literature well beyond the fifth century. The early stages of the conceptualisation of a divide between east and west can be seen in the 490s, with literary responses to the revolt of the Ionian Greeks from Persia drawing upon this perceived gap. The early Ionian geographer Hecataeus of Miletus had composed a *Periēgēsis* whose two books seem to have envisaged a cultural as well as a physical distance between the east and west – they bore the titles *Europe* and *Asia* – and he was said by Herodotus (5.36.2) to have advised the Ionians against revolt from Darius in the 490s, being aware of the vast resources which the Persian king had at his command. Dramatically, Phrynichus' *Capture of Miletus*, thought by most scholars to have been produced in the late 490s,[1] had depicted Miletus as taken by the Persians (494 BC); Herodotus (6.21.2) records that the playwright was fined by the Athenians as punishment for the extreme

[1] The dating of the *Capture of Miletus* has been the subject of some controversy, with some suggesting a date as late as 480/79 BC. 493/2 BC (the year of Themistocles' archonship) seems to be a plausible date, although it cannot be proved. Rosenbloom 1993, pp. 170-1 summarises the main debate succinctly, with references.

emotional reaction which his play had produced in the audience. It was after the retreat of Xerxes' forces in 479 BC, however, with the celebration and commemoration of the victory over the Persians, that the idea of the Europe/Asia contrast began to crystallise in Greek thought; Hall (1989, p. 6) has commented that, 'Although a sense of shared ethnicity between all Hellenes existed in the archaic period, it was the Persian wars which engendered the polarization of Greek and barbarian.'

From this point on the Persian Wars became embedded in the Greek collective memory by way of a range of literary, artistic and ceremonial modes of expression which ensured that those of whose communal heritage these events were a part were never to be allowed to forget this great achievement. Along with the mythical precedents in which civilisation had triumphed over barbarism – the Trojan War, and the Amazonomachy, for example – this new episode in the recent history of Greece became assimilated into the corpus of chronicles of the glorious past.[2] It seems that the physical reminders of the barbarian invasion were ubiquitous; at Athens, for example, the ruined temples on the Acropolis remained as Xerxes had left them until the commencement of Pericles' building programme in the middle of the fifth century. It was later asserted that the Greeks had taken an oath declaring that they would not rebuild any temple which had been burnt or destroyed by the barbarians, but would leave them as a memorial to the sacrilege committed by the enemy. A fourth-century inscription details this oath.[3] Although the inscribed version does not include the clause concerning

[2] On the comparisons which were made between mythical and 'real' history at Athens in particular, see Castriota 1992, pp. 3-16.
[3] Tod 1948, no. 204 (pp. 303-7) = Rhodes and Osborne 2003, no. 88 (pp. 440-9).

rebuilding, the oath was also quoted by Lycurgus (*Against Leocrates* 80-81), and, much later, by Diodorus (11.29.2-3); their versions include the pledge not to rebuild the monuments. A large question mark hangs over the authenticity of the oath.[4] Regardless of whether or not any such pact had been made in the fifth century, however, the ultimate effect was the same; the presence of the ruined monuments until the mid-fifth century meant that Athenians were constantly reminded of the destruction caused by the Persian forces. Elsewhere, of course, spoils taken from the defeated Persians and dedicated in sanctuaries would have served too as a physical record of the wars.[5] Suggestions have been made that some of the more ostentatious objects might well have found their way into public usage. Broneer (1944) argues that the tent of Xerxes, taken after Plataea, was used as the *skene* for the theatre in Athens;[6] Allen (1941) suggested that the timbers from the Persian ships destroyed at Salamis were used to support the seats in the Athenian theatre; Thompson (1956, p. 286) has even suggested that the seat of Xerxes was kept in the Parthenon in antiquity.

Art created by the Greeks also began to demonstrate an interest in the new enemy from the east; several red-figure vases show Persian figures dressed in elaborately decorated clothing (as opposed to Greek warriors who appear as nude), with trousers, long sleeves and soft caps, and armed with bows and

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[4] Habicht 1961 demonstrates that the 'Plataea oath' was one of several such documents current in the fourth century and purporting to date from the Persian Wars period; he is sceptical about the authenticity of all of them. Rather, they appear to be part of a series of invented traditions concerning the fifth century. On the 'Plataea oath' see also Meiggs 1972, pp. 504-7.

[5] Thompson 1956, and Miller 1997, pp. 29-62 examine the evidence for the Persian spoils.

[6] See Robkin 1980 on the possibility that the Odeum of Pericles was based on Xerxes' tent (as claimed later by Plutarch – *Pericles* 13.9-11 – and Pausanias 1.20.4). Camp 2001, p. 101 suggests that the tent may have originally been used as the skene for the theatre, and later replicated in stone and timber for the Periclean Odeum; the archaeological remains of the Odeum suggest a similarity to the audience chambers of the Persian royal palaces at Susa and Persepolis. Miller 1997, pp. 235-6 is hightly sceptical of the link between the tent and the Odeum.

arrows.[7] Only one vase has been identified as perhaps relating to a specific character from the Persian invasion, however, and that is a fourth-century Apulian krater, known as the 'Darius vase'.[8] Here Darius is depicted in the centre (with his name inscribed), seated upon an elaborate throne, and surrounded by various other barbarian figures – a messenger, members of the royal council, a treasurer and Persian satraps. Beneath the messenger is inscribed the title ΠΕΡΣΑΙ. Above the king are the gods, with Hellas being led up to Zeus by Athena, and Asia being enticed by Apate ('Deception'). This has been thought to relate to a fourth-century play about the Persian invasion.[9] On a larger scale, the battle of Marathon was said to have been depicted in one of the paintings in Athens' Stoa Poikile, built around 460 BC,[10] and Castriota (1992, pp. 134-183) has illustrated how the building of the Parthenon, and the subjects of its sculptures (depicting mythical battles against Amazons, Centaurs and giants – all of which could be seen as legendary precedents for the Persian invasion), were inextricably linked with the Persian defeat. Built on the Acropolis too in the 450s BC was the statue of Athena Promachos ('fighter in front'), sculpted by Phidias; Gehrke (2001, p. 303) has commented how this statue 'provided a lasting reminder of the victory over the Persians'.

It is likely too that, as well as such material reminders of the Greeks' victory over Persia, there were also regular ceremonial commemorations of the wars;

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[7] See Boardman 1989 pp. 218-20, with figures 29 and 220. Amazonomachies on the vases also seem to be used as a parable for the Persian invasion (Boardman 1989 p. 227); for this parallel on monuments as well as vases, see also Castriota 1992, pp. 43-58.
[8] Trendall and Webster 1971 p. 112 with figure III.5,6, and Hall 1996, p. 8 with figure 1.
[9] Anti (1952) suggests that the vase may represent a fourth-century re-enactment of Phrynichus' *Persae*.
[10] See Wycherley 1953 pp. 27-9 and Castriota 1992 pp. 28-32.

certainly at the dramatic festivals of Athens we know that reminders of the wars were enacted on stage. The *Phoenissae* (*Phoenician Women*) of Phrynichus is an early example of this kind of dramatic recollection of the wars. The ancient Alexandrian hypothesis to Aeschylus' *Persae* gives us our greatest clues about this particular drama, suggesting that Aeschylus' play was modelled on the *Phoenissae* and quoting the opening line of Phrynichus' play: 'These belong to the Persians who have long ago departed.'[11] The hypothesis goes on to say that the defeat of Xerxes was reported by a eunuch who was setting out thrones for the magistrates of the empire at the beginning of the play; thus Phrynichus' work seems to have been one of the earliest demonstrations of the Greek fascination with what was perceived as Persian emasculation and effeminacy. Of the rest of the play's plot, however, nothing is known.[12]

Aside from drama, the poems ascribed to Simonides of Ceos also lend an insight into the early foundations of the Persian Wars tradition. Several of these works have survived; the shorter pieces attributed to him are epigrams composed in order to be carved on monuments, memorials and offerings erected in thanks for the victories or in remembrance of the fallen.[13] Here the concentration is, not unexpectedly, entirely upon the Greek side of the story with little detail which lends any insight into the Greek portrayal of the enemy; we find generic references to 'Medes' or 'Persians', to the Greek escape from slavery or the Persian superiority in numbers, but without any more specific characterisation of the Persian forces. The longer poems of Simonides include elegiac poems on the

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[11] *TGrF* 3 F 8.
[12] See Lloyd-Jones 1990, pp. 233-4.
[13] See Podlecki 1968, W. C. West 1970, and Barron 1990 on the Persian Wars epigrams.

battles of the Persian Wars – Salamis, Artemisium, and the recently-discovered Plataea poem[14] – as well as a poem for the Thermopylae dead.[15] These appear to have been commissioned by particular states and individuals and intended for performance in a specific places at specific events – this serves to confirm notions about the ritualistic commemoration of the Persian Wars. The emphasis is often upon the *kleos* and *aretē* of the Greek forces, and the sacrifices which they made to save Greece from slavery with little reference made to the identity of the Persians.[16] Other evidence concerning poetry from the fifth century suggests that the Sicilian poet Empedocles composed a *Crossing of Xerxes*, but that the work was burned by his sister.[17] Choerilus of Samos was also said to have composed an epic poem on the Persian Wars, which is variously cited as *The Victory of the Athenians over Xerxes*, *Perseis* or *Persica*; this began with an invocation of the Muse to tell how war came from Asia to Europe and contained an epic catalogue of Xerxes' forces.[18]

The range of evidence for Greek interest in Persia after the Persian Wars thus suggests that the barbarian enemy was viewed with a complex mixture of contempt, as a response to the violation of the homeland, and curiosity, resulting from this close contact with a foreign people. It might even be possible to

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[14] On the Plataea elegy, see Boedeker 1995, Rutherford 1996, pp. 174-88, Stehle 1996, and Aloni 1997.

[15] For the Simonides fragments see West 1992 (b), pp. 114-37. Boedeker and Sider's 2001 volume is a comprehensive collection of studies of these fragments.

[16] Pindar too made occasional reference to the Persian Wars in his athletic victory odes. See, for example, *Pythian* 1.75-77, *Isthmian* 5.48-49. At *Isthmian* 8.7-15 he expresses relief that the recent troubles (war against Persia, although this is not explicitly stated) are now over.

[17] Diogenes Laertius 8.57 quotes Aristotle as saying that Empedocles' style was 'Homeric', and that he used lots of metaphors and other poetic devices. He wrote various poems including a *Crossing of Xerxes*, which his sister burned deliberately because it was unfinished.

[18] On the evidence for, and fragments of, Choerilus' epic, see Huxley 1969. The chronology relating to Choerilus' life is confused but it seems certain that he was writing at some point in the fifth century.

suggest that Greek views of Persia stretched as far as envy, given the profusion of references which are made in literature to the untold riches and luxury of the Persian land.[19] Miller, in her 1997 study of Athenian cultural borrowing from Persia (referred to as 'Perserie'), comments (p. 1) that:

> The contradiction between anti-Persian rhetoric and Persising reality is ideological. Even while diffusing the threat of Achaemenid power and enhancing their own self-definition by portraying *barbaroi* as weak, emotional, and incapable of rational thought, the Athenians appropriated and reshaped aspects of Achaemenid culture to their own social and imperial needs.

This paradoxical combination of responses to Persia can perhaps be likened to British views on the French in the eighteenth century; as a result of a series of wars at this time, Catholic France became the other against which Protestant Britain was defined, and was a focus for hatred but also a source of envy (and emulation) resulting from its luxurious exports and cultural reputation.[20]

Within this context of celebration and commemoration, hatred and curiosity, the long-standing traditions concerning the wars with Persia developed in Greece. Part of this was necessarily the image of the Persian king who, in person, had brought the second expedition from the east to Greece. This invasion was, as we have seen, crucial in informing Greek perceptions of Persia from the fifth century on. Whilst none of the sources discussed above make any direct reference to Xerxes himself they are nonetheless important for our purposes in setting the

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[19] Tuplin 1996, p. 175 notes, for example, that the Athenians produced and used imitations of Persian luxury goods such as gold and silver tableware.
[20] See Colley 2003, p. 18 and pp. 87-91.

scene against which the Xerxes-tradition developed. The first extant source which does give us an insight into this particular strand of the Persian Wars theme is Aeschylus' tragic *Persae*, where the Persian king is actually seen on stage.

Aeschylus and Xerxes

As one of the earliest extant examples of the phenomenon of Orientalism – seen as the ideological construction of the Orient by the West – Aeschylus' *Persae* was described by Said as 'a highly artificial enactment of what a non-Oriental has made into a symbol for the whole Orient' (1978, p. 21; cf. pp. 56-7). More specifically, the text is 'the earliest testimony to the absolute polarization in Greek thought of Hellene and barbarian'.[21] Although the play presents the defeat of Persia as though from a Persian point of view – with the action taking place entirely within the Persian court and all of the characters as Persians – it was of course written by an Athenian (and, at that, one said to have fought the Persians at Marathon and whose brother was actually killed there)[22] for an Athenian audience, and was produced in 472 BC, only eight years after the defeat at Salamis with which the play is concerned. The Persian characters are therefore viewed through the eyes of the Greek victor, and so the *Persae* presents to us not

[21] Hall 1989, p. 57.
[22] For the evidence concerning Aeschylus' epitaph, which states that he fought at Marathon, see Sommerstein 1995; Herodotus 6.114 provides details of one Cynegeirus, son of Euphorion (and therefore the brother of Aeschylus), who died having had his hand chopped off with an axe when getting hold of the stern of a Persian ship after Marathon.

a truthful account of how real Persians actually behaved, but lends instead an insight into the way in which the Athenians perceived their barbarian enemy.

Within this framework, the figure of Xerxes provides the focus for much of the play's discourse with the east, displaying many of the characteristics which were soon to become familiar stereotypical aspects of the barbarian invader – here we find both the fearsome, cruel tyrant, and the effeminate, ineffectual weakling embodied in one character. These two character-types might seem wholly incompatible, and yet all subsequent portrayals of Xerxes draw in varying degrees upon this combination of the risible and the terrifying. Here was an enemy capable of inspiring terror and awe, who had threatened the homeland and the lives of the Greeks at large; by articulating the absolute fear felt at his advance, the ultimate victors were able to express their pride in their own success at overcoming the Persian against all the odds, yet at the same time Xerxes' defeat – precisely because it had seemed at first that all was weighted in his favour – made him worthy too of their scorn and derision. This first appearance of Xerxes on the western stage therefore foreshadows much of the later dialogue concerning the Persian monarch. The *Persae* also presents us with an insight into many of the key topoi which were later to become standard symbols in the portrayals of the king found in western treatments of the Persian Wars tradition; these were images which would remain surprisingly stable, recurring for centuries and enduring even until the present day.

Xerxes as the formidable invader

> The raging leader of populous Asia
> drives his godlike flock against every land
> in two movements: an equal of the gods, born of the golden race,
> he trusts in his stalwart
> and stubborn commanders both on land and on the sea.
>
> He casts from his eyes the dark
> glance of a lethal snake;
> with numerous soldiers and numerous sailors
> he speeds on in his Syrian chariot,
> leading an Ares armed with the bow against famous spearsmen.
>
> No-one is so renowned for valour
> that they can withstand such a huge flood of men,
> and ward them off with sturdy defences.
>
> (*Persae* 74-89)[23]

Thus is Xerxes first introduced to us in the parodos. The Chorus of Persian elders, here expressing their concern for the welfare of the massive Persian army which has gone to Greece with their leader, articulate too the way in which many Greeks must surely have perceived the advancing Persian king with his vast force. Here the emphasis is primarily upon the numbers of the Persian troops, and the awe and terror which these must have inspired. This extract is

[23] All translations of the *Persae* used here are those of Hall 1996.

characteristic of the tone of the entire parodos in which the Chorus give a roll-call of the Persian force and its commanders which reads not unlike an epic catalogue of troops (21-55). Repeatedly the Chorus highlight the fact that the *whole* of Asia has gone to Greece (11, 56-7, 61), and the frequent use of words beginning with πολυ- (πολύχρυσος, 'rich in gold', at 3, 9, and 53; πολύανδρος, 'populous', at 74; πολύχειρ καὶ πολυναύτας, 'with numerous soldiers and numerous sailors', at 83) stresses the manifold nature of the army and the excesses of the king. Later the Chorus, in a Homeric-style simile to convey a sense of the numbers of the force, say that 'all the cavalry and all the infantry, like a swarm of bees, have left with the leader of the army' (128-9).[24] It is in such descriptions that we see a snapshot of the inception of what were later to become well-worn clichés concerning the numbers of the Persian forces and the opulence of the march to Hellas. In the immediate instance this emphasis on Persian numbers expresses the terrifying nature of the invasion from a Greek point of view; the Persian Chorus believe, as many Greeks must have believed, that the Persian force was irresistible and that it would be impossible for anyone to withstand such an onslaught. It also reminds us, of course, that the scale of any disaster which befalls the Persian force must necessarily be huge and total.

The picture of Xerxes which is imagined here is necessarily a terrifying one; he is visualised as being a deadly snake, and the Chorus go on to refer to the 'Ares armed with the bow' (that is, his army) which he leads against the Greeks. This reference to the indiscriminate and bloodthirsty god of war[25] conveys some sense

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[24] Cf. *Iliad* 2.87-90, where the assembly of Achaeans is described as being like a swarm of bees.
[25] Hall 1996, *ad* 73 notes also that it is Ares in the *Iliad* who is described as θοῦρος, just as Xerxes is said to be θούριος here.

of the havoc which the Persian king intended to wreak upon his enemy by stirring up the kind of violence associated with Ares. It is significant here too that Aeschylus sets up the opposition between Europe and Asia in terms of the weapons used by each. Whilst Xerxes' army carry bows, the fighters from Greece bear spears; the bow and arrow were to become symbolic of Persia and are alluded to as such on frequent occasions throughout the play.[26] The dichotomy implies that masculine warriors fight as hoplites, whilst their enemies, fighting with bow and arrow like the Amazon women of Greek myth, are effeminized and inferior.

As well as this sense of the enormity of his army, one other key image relating to Xerxes is introduced in the parodos of the *Persae*. At lines 65-71, the Chorus sing: 'The King's army, which annihilates cities, has already passed over to our neighbour's land opposite, crossing the strait named after Helle, Athamas' daughter, on a floating bridge bound with flaxen ropes, yoking the neck of the sea with a roadway bolted together (πολύγομφον ὅδισμα ζυγὸν ἀμφιβαλὼν αὐχένι πόντου)'. This is the play's first use of an image which recurs later with reference to the Hellespont crossing; at 130-1, the Chorus again describe the army as having 'crossed to the other continent after yoking the sea between the two headlands (τὸν ἀμφίζευκτον ἐξαμείψας ἀμφοτέρας ἅλιον / πρῶνα κοινὸν αἴας)'. The same metaphor is later used twice by the queen (722, 736). The bridging, or yoking, of the Hellespont was to become another of the standard topoi relating to Xerxes' invasion of Greece, acting as a paradigm of the hybris of the king. References to the crossing from Asia turned the actual physical event

[26] Cf. 26, 30, 55, 147-9, 239-40, 278, 555-6, 926, 1020-3.

into something with a deeper symbolic meaning; it came to represent Xerxes' despotic cruelty as well as his mission to enslave the Greeks in order to incorporate them into his already vast slave empire.

The image of the sea as having a yoke (ζυγόν) placed about its neck metaphorically implies that it is a living being, to be tamed, just as Xerxes attempted to subdue Greece with the yoke of slavery; often in literary treatments of the crossing the sea is described as having been treated in various ways as a slave by the king.[27] The noun τὸ ζεῦγος had been used since Homeric times to refer to a pair of beasts joined or yoked together (for example, *Iliad* 18.543), or to the vehicle driven by these beasts (see LSJ s.v. ζεῦγος); this unquestioningly involves the subjection of the animals involved. The verb ζεύγνυμι also applied to yoking or harnessing, although it appears also in other contexts where joining or fastening take place, and not necessarily always involving slavery; at *Iliad* 18.276, for example, city doors are said to be ἐζευγμέναι.[28] The verb can also be used to refer to marriage; in such a context, like the English term 'wedlock', it suggests a binding action. The earliest example given by LSJ to refer to the joining of opposite banks with bridges is the Aeschylean usage; frequently in Greek literature from this point on the term is applied to Xerxes' bridge which might be taken to imply that the Persian invasion suggested this particular application of the term. When we combine it with other terminology relating to slavery in the *Persae* (and later literature describing the crossing) the notion that Xerxes was seen to be attempting to enslave the elements as well as the people of

[27] The most obvious of these is Herodotus' description (7.35) of Xerxes as having had the Hellespont whipped, and a pair of fetters thrown into it after a storm broke up the first bridge which had been constructed. Timotheus also uses the image at *Persae* 72-81.
[28] For further examples, see LSJ s.v. ζεύγνυμι.

Greece becomes even stronger. Later in the *Persae*, for example, Darius describes Xerxes as having used fetters (δεσμώμασιν, 745) and hammered shackles (πέδαις σφυρηλάτοις, 747) to constrain the sea, and, in doing so, having tried to overcome the will of the gods.

The desire to enslave what nature intended to be free is of course a crucial part of the dialogue concerning the Persian Wars and the hybris of Xerxes from the fifth century on; in the *Persae* the connection between the Hellespontine crossing and the intention of Xerxes to enslave the people of Greece is clear; the same images are used of both actions. For example, the Chorus sing (49-50) that 'the dwellers of sacred Tmolus are set on casting the yoke of slavery (ζυγὸν ἀμφιβαλεῖν δούλιον) onto Greece'.[29] Perhaps the most striking image of such subjugation in the play, however, comes in the queen's account of her dream (179-99). She relates that she saw two women, one in Persian clothes, and one in Doric garments; these may represent either Asia and Hellas respectively, or the Asiatic and mainland Greeks. The two quarrelled, and Xerxes 'tried to restrain and mollify them. He harnessed them both beneath his chariot and put a yoke-strap beneath their necks (ἅρμασιν δ' ὕπο / ζεύγνυσιν αὐτὼ καὶ λέπαδν' ὑπ' αὐχένων / τίθησι)' (190-2).

With the use of such images, Xerxes is thus seen as a straightforwardly terrifying figure, intent on enslaving the Greeks whose homeland he had invaded with the vast army and naval force at his command. This frightening encounter was of

[29] Later, too, the Persians themselves are described as being 'yoked' under Xerxes' regime; the Chorus imagine that they may be able to speak freely once this yoke has been removed (591-4).

course all part of the Athenians' experience of the war with the Persians, and the portrayal of the Persian king as the formidable invader in this way might seem to be an uncomplicated way for Aeschylus to tap into his audience's emotions. The situation is more complex than that, however; in spite of the seeming presentation of Xerxes as a larger than life tyrant, formidable in his power, Aeschylus at the same time succeeds in sidelining the king from the action of his play, and implicitly from the action of the Persian Wars.

An absent presence

Although Xerxes' name is first mentioned in the fifth line of the *Persae*, he does not actually appear on stage until line 908, well over three-quarters of the way through the play's 1078 lines. His eventual appearance in itself introduced a paradox for the ancient Athenian audience; the king's *presence* on stage, before their eyes, marked the end of his journey back to the Persian court and thus represented for them his *absence* from Greece, as the culmination of the Greek victory at Salamis. Tied in with this, we also see the emergence here of a 'discourse of negativity' through which the king himself is presented as emphatically lacking in substance.

With the opening lines of the play, Xerxes is already conspicuous by his absence; the first mention of his name is in the context of his departure from Persia to Greece. The Chorus open with the following lines (1-7):

> We are called "the Faithful" of the Persians
> who have gone to the land of Greece,

and we are guardians of the sumptuous palace, rich in gold.
Lord Xerxes the King himself,
son of Darius,
chose us by virtue of our seniority to oversee his domain.

Xerxes is thus among those who have gone (τῶν οἰχομένων, 1), and attention is drawn to the fact that these elders have been appointed in his stead to oversee matters whilst he is away.[30] Immediately we are aware of this void at the Persian court; in a sense the next nine hundred lines anticipate Xerxes' eventual arrival on stage. This prolonged delay allows time for us to be introduced to the king from a distance; he may be physically far away, but his name and his actions are on the lips of the play's characters throughout.[31] We might be led to believe, then, that Xerxes, although offstage, is largely at the forefront. The situation is not so simple, however. Further examination of the way in which Xerxes is depicted will reveal only a faceless shadowy figure, whose literal absence is mirrored by the text's constant failure to conceive a tangible idea of his actual characteristics.

Xerxes is frequently defined by his material surroundings. The parodos, as discussed earlier, concentrates more upon the army and its roll call of commanders than specifically upon the man at its head. The effect of the mass of troops, detailed in forty lines (16-55) before any kind of description of the king

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[30] It seems likely that Phrynichus' *Phoenissae* too began with such an emphasis upon the absence of the Persian king from the court; as the hypothesis to Aeschylus' *Persae* records, the *Phoenissae* opened with the line which stresses absence rather than presence: 'These belong to the Persians who have long ago departed' (τάδ' ἐστὶ Περσῶν τῶν πάλαι βεβηκότων).

[31] Xerxes' name is mentioned a total of sixteen times before his arrival on stage: six times by the Chorus (5,144, 156, 550, 551, 552), four times by the queen (199, 718, 734, 754), four times by the messenger (299, 341, 356, 465) and twice by Darius (782, 832).

himself, appears to dwarf Xerxes. It also stresses the fact that Xerxes, whilst being absent himself, is responsible also for creating further absence by emptying out Asia of her men (59-60): 'Such is the flower of manhood, such is the flower of the Persian land which has gone (οἴχεται)'.[32] The first description of Xerxes himself does not come until lines 74-85 (cited above, p. 34) Here, again, the king is described largely in terms of his surroundings and resources rather than his own personal characteristics. The impression created is again one of distance. By being described as 'driving his godlike flock' here (ποιμανόριον θεῖον ἐλαύνει, 75), the king is envisaged as standing behind his troops, preceded by them in the invasion rather than at the forefront; this does not sit well with the aggressive image of him as θούριος, 'raging' (74), presenting instead a picture of apparent cowardice. Similarly, the verb διώκων, used at line 84, conveys a sense of 'following', or 'driving on', rather than leadership from the front.

Thus shielded by his vast army, Xerxes, with his many soldiers and many sailors, is cast in the shade of the resources of his empire, 'trusting in his stubborn and stalwart commanders' (79-80), rather than taking positive action himself. The description of the position of the king in relation to his troops may well have been based upon actual observation by the Greeks of the way in which the Persians fought, yet the fact that Aeschylus chose to single this out in his description surely demonstrates that importance was ascribed to this feature, which illustrates the difference between the distant Persian king and the Greek leaders who were usually to be found in the thick of the fight. The chariot in which Xerxes rides (84) acts symbolically to reaffirm the distancing of the king

[32] For the theme of the 'emptying out' of Asia, see Harrison 2000, pp. 66-75.

from the action; like his array of troops, it shields him from the fray, as well as literally removing him from the immediate action. Of course, Xerxes' chariot would not be the only such vehicle in the Persian entourage (the Chorus mention the 'numerous chariots' of the troops at line 46, for example), but the fact that the king's ἅρμα is singled out for mention here is again significant in terms of his perceived role within the army.[33] The overall impression created is one of Xerxes as onlooker rather than active participant.

Shadows of a king

The distancing of Xerxes is reiterated further with the appearance of the queen on stage. Her account of her dream (179-99) appears to endorse the suggestion that the king is a man of little substance. Significantly, the description of the dream is the only place in the play where we are presented with an image of Xerxes as taking positive action on his own account rather than either looking on or simply giving the orders for action to be taken. As noted earlier, the dream, in which Xerxes yokes together two women representing either Asia and Hellas, or Asiatic and mainland Greece, mirrors both Xerxes' actions in trying to conquer Greece and his bridging of the Hellespont. Ultimately, however, he is thwarted in his attempt to join the two continents; one of the women struggles beneath the yoke and throws him from his chariot. We are told quite simply by the queen, 'My son fell out' (πίπτει δ' ἐμὸς παῖς, 197). By being toppled from the chariot which marked him out earlier, Xerxes is reduced to nothing as he is symbolically

[33] Hall 1996, *ad* 84, also comments on the opportunity in performance for a contrast between the splendid mode of transport mentioned here and the shabby 'curtained car' on which Xerxes later seems to appear at 1000-1.

stripped of one of the material assets used to define him. In the dream as well as in reality and in the world of the play Xerxes' attempt at control is thwarted and he is reduced to a state of passivity and helplessness; his father, in the queen's vision, can only stand and watch whilst his son tears his robes in grief (198-200). The introduction of Xerxes as only a dream figure rather than as a real character on stage reaffirms his intangible state in the play. He is not yet literally brought before the eyes of the audience (either the Chorus, who are the play's internal audience, or the actual spectators of the drama), as the queen stresses(211-12): 'These things are terrifying for me to *see*, and for you to *hear* (ταῦτ' ἔμοιγε δείματ' ἔστ' ἰδεῖν, / ὑμῖν δ' ἀκούειν)'. We have yet to see whether these shadows will prove to have any substance.

The appearance of Darius in the dream introduces a new motif in relation to the portrayal of Xerxes. The image of his dead father observing and pitying Xerxes in his stricken state mirrors the play's overall plot where Darius does indeed appear on stage to comment on his son's actions. Indeed, Darius, although dead, seems to us to be far more real than Xerxes himself for much of the play; this has crucial implications for our perception of Xerxes as more of an absence than a presence. From the very beginning we have been reminded of Darius as Xerxes' forebear; in line 6, the present king is referred to as Δαρειογενής, 'son of Darius'. The appearance of Darius in the Queen's dream foreshadows the actual arrival of Darius' ghost on stage at line 681. Darius, although actually dead, spends more time before the eyes of the audience than his son who is still living; he speaks a total of one hundred and twenty-five lines whilst Xerxes, when he appears, is given only sixty-eight lines, and sings these in the form of ritual lament rather

than speaking as his father does.[34] Not only is Darius given the opportunity to pass judgement on the actions of his son but he also performs the crucial function of prophesying what will happen next – the Persian destruction at Plataea.

The effect of bringing Darius to the forefront has powerful implications in terms of the way in which it affects our view of Xerxes. Repeatedly throughout the play the present king is presented merely as an inadequate shadow of his father. This contrast of the two kings is made both by the Chorus and by Darius himself. It first appears in the ode of lamentation sung by the Chorus immediately after the news has arrived of the destruction of the Persian army (548-57):

> For now the entire land of Asia mourns
> emptied out of its men.
> Xerxes led them away (*popoi*),
> Xerxes destroyed them (*totoi*),
> Xerxes wrong-headedly drove everything on in seafaring ships.
>
> Why was Darius, lord of the bow,
> beloved leader of Susa,
> so benign in the past to his citizens?

The emphasis on Xerxes as an agent of destruction here could not be more powerful with the repetition of his name at the beginning of three lines. By contrast, we are reminded that Darius caused no harm to his people. Xerxes thus becomes the negative image of his father, representing only what his father was not. This is re-emphasised again in the Chorus' necromantic hymn which

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[34] See below, p. 57, for discussion of the significance of Xerxes as singing rather than speaking.

summons Darius' ghost (634-80). Here they stress their love and respect for their former king (652-5):

> For he never killed our men
> through the ruinous waste of war.
> He was called godlike in counsel for the Persians, and godlike in
> counsel
> he was, since he steered the army well.

By implication, then, Xerxes' actions are the precise opposite of those of his father by whose standards he is to be judged.

With the appearance of the ghost of Darius himself the contrast is taken still further. In the first place the dead king's presence on stage serves to stress the absence of his son from the scene; he, although a ghost, is more real to the audience than Xerxes who has yet to appear. Bardel (1999, p. 101) comments that the raising of Darius' ghost is 'part of a nexus of violations of the natural order committed by the Persians and their leader Xerxes' and later discusses the interplay of presence and absence which is stressed by the appearance of the ghost: 'Darius' current *presence* is not only in contrast to his former *absence*: his temporary appearance also heightens the irreversible loss of the flower of the Persian youth' (p. 113). I would argue too that the appearance of Darius also makes the absent Xerxes seem still more distant and insubstantial; this shade has more substance than the still living Persian king.

At the same time the ghost of Darius acts as a physical reminder of all which Xerxes is not. The dramatic portrayal of Xerxes as antithetical to his father

necessitates some subtle manipulation of history, however. At lines 744-51, for example, Darius expresses his disbelief that his son, in his 'youthful audacity' (νέῳ θράσει, 744), should have attempted to alter nature itself by attempting to enslave the Hellespont with his bridge. First, this emphasis on Xerxes' youth, seen also at line 13, and used to contrast with the wise old Darius, overlooks the fact that Xerxes was around forty years old at Salamis! For the contrast with Darius' own actions to work here, we are also required to forget that he too attempted something similar to his son's project. Herodotus refers to Darius' own joining of Asia and Europe by bridging the Bosphorus (4.87-8, cf. 3.134.4). Aeschylus' Chorus, however, later omit any mention of this crossing by Darius in their ode in praise of his military achievements (852-907).[35] Darius also expresses concern that the wealth which he himself amassed will be destroyed by his son and the queen responds by saying that her son was urged on in his folly by wicked men who persuaded him to try to extend his father's empire (753-8). Of course this only serves to undermine Xerxes further, as he is presented as being manipulated by the ambitions of others rather than taking independent action on his own account.[36]

Ultimately Darius makes the contrast of father and son explicit by commenting that never before has such a disaster befallen the city of Susa (759-61); he goes on to boast, 'I went on many military campaigns with a large army, but I never brought such a great catastrophe on the city' (780-1). Xerxes is thus seen to be a

[35] In contrast with the slant given to events by Aeschylus, Herodotus tends to emphasise a degree of continuity between Darius and Xerxes. The effect there is also to undermine Xerxes, although in a way which obviously differs from Aeschylus' presentation of Xerxes as the antithesis of his father. The effect in Herodotus' narrative of stressing the continuity between the two kings is to trivialise Xerxes by showing him as failing to have any ideas of his own. See below pp. 90-4.
[36] Cf. Herodotus 7.5-6 on Mardonius' influence in persuading Xerxes to invade Greece.

personal failure, implicitly lacking the qualities that his father possessed. His youth, ambition and folly make him the inverse of Darius and contribute to his ultimate defeat. Once again, for this to have its desired impact, we must conveniently forget that Darius too, although not present in person, organised an invasion of Greece which was thwarted at Marathon; he had also suffered a great personal military humiliation when, having invaded the Scythians' territory, he was outwitted by them and forced to retreat. The negative comparison between father and son, however artificially imposed, serves nonetheless to sideline Xerxes still further; rather than being given a definition in his own right, he becomes the antithesis of his father's positive characteristics and is thus presented as no more than a mere inadequate shadow of Darius.[37] The Chorus' lavish eulogy of Darius' rule after the departure of his ghost (852-907) ratifies this impression. This begins with the somewhat excessive exclamation (852-6), '*O popoi*, what a great and excellent life of civic order was ours, when the old all-sufficing undamaging invincible godlike King Darius ruled the land!' and goes on to praise the dead king's military exploits and to list the lands over which he ruled.[38]

Here we gain an insight into the beginnings of the process by which Xerxes was to become the archetypal wicked barbarian king, as contrasted with his predecessors. Wiesehöfer (2001, pp. 42-55) has examined this phenomenon,

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[37] As Easterling 1984, pp. 37-8 has pointed out, the contrast which is made between Xerxes and Darius complicates the straightforward Greek/Persian dichotomy, and thus, partly by way of the contrast with his father which is evoked, 'Xerxes becomes an example of humanity over-reaching itself, not just of an essentially Persian mode of behaviour' (p. 38).

[38] Hall 1996, *ad* 852-907 notes that many of the states in the list were Greek communities which were once under Persian control, but had been liberated by the time of the play's production in 472 BC; she comments here that 'The play's ostensible lament for the Persians' lost domains functions for the audience as a celebration of the regained autonomy of numerous Greek city-states.'

contrasting Xerxes with Cyrus, who has been received since antiquity as a shining example of the good Persian king. He shows that the sharp contrast made between Cyrus and Xerxes is not justified, and that the evidence which remains in fact shows that their methods of safeguarding their reign were not vastly different. Similarly in the *Persae* the contrast between Xerxes and Darius seems largely artificial, as shown in Chapter One above, where inscriptions from the reigns of the two kings appeared to demonstrate continuity. The demonisation of Xerxes no doubt stemmed largely from the fact that his was the last Persian campaign to blight Greek soil. Our sources from the crucial period in which the traditions were first shaped are also profoundly Athenocentric, and inevitably his sacking of Athens would have been a key factor contributing to the image of him which lasted in the Greek imagination.

The fact that Xerxes personally was repulsed by the Greeks (as was not the case in the invasion of Darius, who did not himself participate) perhaps engendered a particularly extreme form of 'othering' in which Xerxes became the embodiment of everything to which the Greeks were opposed; his 'invention' in the Greek imagination took place too at the point when the notion of 'being Greek' was also invented, and in Xerxes was an ideal polar opposite for this notion of ethnicity. The creation of this hate-figure could well have resulted in part too from the lack of such a character in the Greek cultural encyclopaedia at this time; Cyrus' son Cambyses had come to be viewed as an example of impious despotism, as

contrasted with his father's benevolence.[39] This, however, was the first time that the Greeks had quite literally been confronted with a real-life model of such outrageous behaviour.

Xerxes the onlooker

Xerxes is sidelined even in descriptions of key events thought to have been his doing. Just as the chariot acts as a symbol of his detachment from the infantry, so, in the course of the descriptions of events in Greece, Xerxes continues to be an onlooker rather than a participant. Paradoxically, no doubt many members of the ancient audience, although now in the role of spectators, would have been more closely involved in the action at Salamis and Plataea than the Xerxes who is presented to them here. We might contrast here the actions of the Athenian commanders who actively participated in the battles of the Persian Wars; Miltiades at Marathon and Themistocles at Salamis. Again, the literary removal of Xerxes from the action may be based on real Greek experience of how Persian leaders behaved in conflict, yet Aeschylus' constant stress on the absence of Xerxes suggests a desire, whether conscious or unconscious, to sideline the Persian king wherever possible.

We first become aware of the removal of Xerxes from the thick of the conflict when the messenger relates his version of events at Salamis. On being asked by

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[39] At *Persae* 765-86, Darius lists the Persian kings from Medos on, and gives comments on whether each was good or bad. Here Cambyses' characteristics are not mentioned, although Mardos, who followed him, is said to have been 'a disgrace to his fatherland and the ancient throne'. It is in Herodotus' work (3.14, 3.16, 3.27-38) that we are first given an account of Cambyses' insane crimes. For a summary of Herodotus' portrayals of Cyrus and Cambyses, see Waters 1971, pp. 49-56.

the queen who survived the disaster and who perished the Messenger replies (299), 'Xerxes himself lives and looks upon the light.' The very fact of the king's survival here sets him apart from the masses and the action of the battle; this becomes clear when the Messenger goes on to relate a catalogue of all those who died (302-30). By still existing the king is, by implication, guilty of failing to take part in the battle. His role in what follows compounds this guilt. The messenger narrates the story of Salamis to his audience and Xerxes' role in this is clearly that of spectator rather than actor. First, he proves himself to be utterly stupid by falling for Themistocles' bogus claim that the Greeks are planning to flee. This appears to foreshadow later treatments of the Salamis story in which Themistocles acts as a foil to Xerxes, pointing up the Persian king's failings as a military leader by displaying his own tactical brilliance. Xerxes' inadequacy as a military tactician is a recurring motif in depictions of his invasion; he lacks the cunning intelligence thought to be inherent in the Greek character.[40]

Acting on the false information Xerxes issues orders to his men in a speech which, significantly, is related by the messenger in *oratio obliqua* (361-71):

> Because Xerxes did not understand that this Greek was tricking him, nor that the gods were against him, on hearing this he immediately gave a pre-battle speech to his admirals as follows. As soon as the sun should cease burning the earth with its rays and darkness should take over the regions of the sky, they were to arrange the column of ships in three rows to guard the passageways leading out to the sounding sea, and other ships were to surround and encircle Ajax's island. If the Greeks

[40] On Themistocles as an example of cunning intelligence in Greek thought (likened to Odysseus), see Detienne and Vernant 1978, pp. 313-14. See also below, pp. 81-3.

> avoided a horrible fate, and found some way of escaping secretly with their ships, the prescribed punishment for all his men would be beheading.

The lack of direct speech here contrasts strongly with the encouraging battle exhortation of the Greeks, a call for the preservation of liberty which is related in direct speech, [41] thus giving an impression of greater immediacy and reality. Not only has Xerxes been outwitted by Themistocles, we learn here, but the gods are against him; in the light of his hybristic behaviour it is not difficult to understand why. Xerxes' threat to have the Persians universally beheaded if all does not go according to plan highlights his cruelty; this is another aspect of the stereotypical barbarian despot, inhumane and no respecter of the law or of the individual. It is clear from this point that the king intends to take no part in the actual battle: by distancing himself, in this way, he implicitly absolves himself of any responsibility for failure. Similarly, he later issues orders for an attack on the island of Psyttaleia (447-454), again as a passive bystander. This time we are given no indication at all of his actual words, directly or indirectly.

The literal distance of Xerxes from the action becomes clear shortly after we are told of his orders concerning Psyttaleia. On seeing the destruction of his men on that island as well as at sea, the messenger relates (465-70),

> Xerxes wailed aloud as he saw the depth of the disaster. For he had a seat with a clear view of the whole militia, a high bank close to the sea. He tore his robes and shrilly screamed, and straightaway gave an order to his infantry, rushing away in disorderly flight.

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[41] 402-5: 'O sons of the Greeks, come on, liberate your fatherland, liberate your children your wives, the shrines of your ancestral gods and the graves of your forefathers. Our struggle now is on behalf of them all!' Podlecki 1970, p. 62 suggests that these are an iambic rendering of Themistocles' actual words at Salamis.

The image of Xerxes sitting on his throne, observing the action of the battle, is another which was later to become firmly established as a standard topos of the Persian invasion, appearing in narratives of Thermopylae as well as of Salamis (see below, pp. 75-7, on the image of the throne in Herodotus' work).[42] Here we see its earliest extant use as a means of detaching the king from the scene of the battle and literally placing him on the sidelines; he is clearly presented only as observer rather than actual participant. Once again he does not speak but instead cries and screams out loud in reaction to the events before him; these actions combine with his ripping of his garments to produce the traditional gestures of lamentation usually associated in Athens with women only and therefore representative of Xerxes' supposed effeminacy as an eastern barbarian.[43] In spite of his grief, however, Xerxes is still able to shout orders to his men in an attempt to exert some control, although once more we are given no indication of his actual words. None of this, of course, has any effect on the outcome of the actual battle.

The distancing of Xerxes from the battle has implications for his moral position. To an ancient Athenian audience he would clearly appear as no hero, but a coward, in contrast with the Greeks who fought to uphold their freedom and their honour. This image of his cowardice is compounded when the Persian king determines to put as much distance as possible between himself and the Greek victors. The messenger relates the flight of the Persian fleet and infantry (480-

[42] Thompson 1956, pp. 287-90 offers some speculations as to the appearance of the seat of Xerxes.
[43] See below, pp. 57-60 for discussion of Xerxes' later lamentation when he actually appears on stage.

514), although with no specific reference to the king himself as yet. Xerxes' own cowardly departure is not made explicit until the appearance of Darius. The queen reiterates then that only Xerxes, with few men remaining, reached the Hellespontine bridge back to Asia (734-6). Later, however, Darius reminds us that his son has left selected troops behind in Greece (803-4). These were the men with Mardonius who were to be defeated at Plataea in the final battle of the Persian Wars, as prophesied by Darius at lines 816-17. This is a powerful reminder of the fact that Xerxes himself was well and truly absent by the time of the last battle; he was safely back in Asia. His departure from Greece and absence at Plataea thus provided a precedent in reality for the way in which the text succeeds in making him appear as marginal both to the play and to the real action of the Persian invasion.

From riches to rags

By the time Xerxes appears on stage, we have already relived in detail the actions surrounding the battle of Salamis without any physical sign of the king himself. This shadowy figure appears at last at line 908 and his entrance raises a number of particular issues concerning of the king's presentation. First of these is the question of in what mode he enters on to the stage. Most scholars have argued that the Chorus' reference to Xerxes' σκηναῖς / τροχηλάτοισιν ('curtained car', 'wheeled tent') at 1000-1 indicates that he appeared on stage mounted upon this vehicle, thought to be an appropriately shabby alternative to the war chariot referred to at 84. Taplin, however (1977, pp. 121-3), has argued that Xerxes entered on foot; in support of his argument he notes Xerxes'

reference to the vigour having gone from his limbs (913), which he claims implies that Xerxes was on foot. He comments (p. 123), 'Here the tented wagon would not only be pointless, it would positively detract and distract from the stylized visual presentation of the fall of Persia, and would spoil Xerxes' entry', and stresses the need for a contrast between this and the spectacle of the queen's first entry,[44] as well as that of Darius.

As Taplin points out (pp. 76-7), entries on a chariot seem to have been common for royalty in tragedy, so it would be of even greater significance were Xerxes to enter on foot. His thesis is an attractive one in the light of the present discussion, although is very hard to reconcile with the Chorus' reference to Xerxes' vehicle at 1000-1. One further significant aspect of Xerxes' arrival, however, which is surely beyond doubt, is the fact that he arrives on stage alone, unaccompanied by his entourage; this is unusual enough for the Chorus to express their astonishment (1000-1), and Xerxes himself notes the absence of escorts at 1036. The fact that he is alone where more usually he would be accompanied by a retinue not only draws attention to the loss of the majority of the Persian army but also serves to diminish the king in stature.

The contrast with the entrances of the queen and Darius is also highlighted by the Chorus' reaction to Xerxes. In the case of both Xerxes' mother and his father, far more ceremonial is practised by the Persian elders than for their returning king. On seeing the queen the Chorus say, 'We prostrate ourselves, and must all address her with words of salutation' (152-4). The use of the verb προσπίτνω,

[44] At 607 it becomes apparent from the text that the queen made her initial entry in a chariot and finely dressed (this would of course have been clear to the audience on her entrance at 155).

here translated as 'prostrate', refers to the Persian practice of *proskynēsis*, doing obeisance before figures in authority. This was thought of by the Greeks as appropriate as part of the worship of gods, but utterly abhorrent if practised in reverence to a mortal, and, as such, a characteristic custom of their barbarian enemies.[45] Following the queen's entrance here the Chorus go on to address her with a string of honorific greetings (155-8). Similarly, the entrance of Darius' ghost is heralded by a great deal of ceremony, primarily in the form of the necromantic hymn sung by the Chorus summoning his ghost (623-80). When he enters, Darius refers to the fact that the ground is being beaten (683) in the ritual actions of the Chorus. Hall (1996 *ad loc.*) suggests that this implies that the Chorus are on the ground, in a gesture akin to *proskynēsis*; this impression is apparently confirmed when the Chorus go on to say that they cannot look at or speak to Darius (694-6): 'Awesome to me is the sight of you, awesome it is to me to speak face to face with you, on account of my old fear of you.' By contrast, when Xerxes appears on stage there is no evidence that the Chorus perform *proskynēsis* before him, and any honorific salutations are entirely absent. Indeed, they do not address him with any formal greeting whatsoever, and their first words to him are spoken as they join his lament. Inevitably, this lack of ceremony adds to the impression that Xerxes has been stripped of the trappings of royalty by which he has been defined so far.

A further question raised by the entrance of Xerxes is that of the identity of the actor playing the king. As Aeschylus used only two actors in his tragedies it

[45] See Hall 1989, pp. 96-7 on the Persian practice of *proskynēsis* as perceived by the Greeks. There has been a great deal of discussion of the practice in relation to Alexander the Great. See, for example, Balsdon 1950, pp. 371-82, who also discusses the origin of the term and its meaning in Greek practice (p. 374).

would have been necessary in the *Persae*, as often, for each to play more than one character. Earlier in the play the queen is seen on stage with either the messenger or Darius; therefore one actor must have played the queen, and one the messenger *and* Darius. Of course Xerxes appears on stage with only the Chorus and no other key character, so he could have been played *either* by the actor playing his mother *or* by the person who played his father. Each of these has its own implications for the character of Xerxes; were he played by the same individual as played Darius this might well have pointed up still further the contrast in the play between father and son, as discussed earlier. It is, however, equally attractive for the purposes of this discussion to suggest that he was played by the figure who had acted as the queen; this is also perhaps more likely given that the Darius/messenger actor had already taken two parts as well as the fact that the queen, otherwise inexplicably, does not remain on stage for the final scene.[46] Were the queen and Xerxes played by the same man this would perhaps have heightened the allusions made to both the king's effeminacy and the excessive influence of the women at his court, both of which are frequently highlighted by Greek sources as aspects of Xerxes' reign; the link of the barbarian and the feminine in Greek thought is well attested. As Pavlovskis (1977, p. 114, n. 6) has pointed out, such a link made between the queen and Xerxes would also have been more appropriate than the suggestion of a resemblance between Xerxes and his father, when Aeschylus makes such strong assertions that Xerxes behaved unlike Darius. Aside from this dramatic necessity there would also have been the practical consideration that an actor playing a

[46] Taplin 1977, p. 120, however, dismisses the need for the actor playing the queen to play Xerxes as well, asserting that the actor who played the messenger and Darius could easily have done so.

female character would have needed the ability to speak in a higher pitch; this is a talent which may well have proved useful in singing the lament of Xerxes.[47]

The fact that Xerxes does not actually speak but only sings his lament, or *thrēnos*, is a crucial aspect of the performance here. Hall (1999, p. 96) notes that, in articulating his feelings purely in song rather than in speech, Xerxes is unique amongst the leading characters in extant tragedy. She later (p. 100) offers some possible suggestions as to why the king does not speak: perhaps because he is the archetypal barbarian; or because the scene is particularly ritualistic, acting like a funerary *kommos*; maybe it is a means of effeminizing him (because of the association of funerary lamentation with women in Greek thought); or it is possibly a result of the fact that he is emotionally disturbed. Each of these factors undoubtedly contributes to Aeschylus' decision to present his Xerxes in this way; the end result is that he is detached still further from the world of reality and in particular from the reality of the public, civic discourse of the Athenian fifth-century male audience.[48] The effeminization of the Persian king is clearly especially crucial here.[49] His display of private emotion in public here also reiterates what the messenger had told us earlier about the king's outburst at Salamis (465-70; see above, pp. 51-2).

During the course of the king's lament the stress is wholly upon what has been lost. Two issues are emphasised in particular: the destruction of the Persian army,

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[47] We might compare here Euripides' *Orestes*, in which the effeminized Menelaus was played by the same actor who played Electra; see Damen 1990 p. 141.
[48] Hall 1999, p. 112: 'Aeschylean and Euripidean singers are generally the 'others' of the free Greek male in his prime.'
[49] See Foley 1993 for examples of the association between female characters and lamentation in tragedy.

and the shabby garments which Xerxes now wears in place of his once splendid robes. The loss of the army is of course one of the crucial themes of the play as a whole, having first been announced by the messenger, whose speech had contained a catalogue of the dead (302-30), which served to remind us of the Chorus' initial list of Xerxes' commanders (21-55). The reversal there is stressed by the fact that the messenger mentions several names which had all been included in the Chorus' original catalogue: Artembares, Arsames, Arkteus, Amistris, Ariomardos and Tharybis are all listed as now among the lost. Later the messenger comments that 'never in a single day has such a large number of men died' (431-2).

The destruction at Salamis was also compounded by the disasters which befell the army on its homeward journey, when many drowned in the Strymon as the ice upon which they crossed was melted by the sun (495-507). Sommerstein (1996, p. 84) notes that this incident mirrors the earlier bridging of the Hellespont where Xerxes tried to turn water into land; here the gods have done the same (and then turned it back again), and the ultimate result is total disaster for the humans concerned. It is worth noting here, however, that the presentation of the Greek victory as a total disaster for Xerxes was all part of the Greek construction of the Persian Wars. There is no evidence to suggest that the Persians necessarily viewed it as such a complete calamity; after all, the campaign related only to a very small frontier of the vast Persian empire. No territory was lost, but instead the Persians simply failed to expand in this direction, and the empire was obviously not significantly weakened; it was to continue for another century and a half.

The appearance of Xerxes now presents a fresh opportunity for lamentation over the destruction of his men. The Chorus remind us of the masses who have perished (924-7): 'Many men (πολλοὶ φῶτες) from Agbatana – the flower of the land, archers, a great thicket of men, tens of thousands of them (πάνυ ταρφύς τις / μυριὰς ἀνδρῶν) – are destroyed.' They later compile lists of all those who are missing, again in a reversal of their opening catalogue (958-61, 967-72, 981-4, 992-9). This obsession of the Chorus with what has been lost, rather than with the king's own personal well-being, acts as a reminder that Xerxes is defined wholly by his army and his resources; he is reduced to nothing without these. This destruction of the army is mirrored by the tattered state of Xerxes' clothing; the king himself actually makes this analogy. The following exchange takes place between Xerxes and the Chorus (1017-23):

Chorus: Is anything left of the Persians, O man of great calamity?

Xerxes: Do you see what remains of my outfit?

Chorus: I see, I see.

Xerxes: And this quiver…

Chorus: What is this that you say has survived?

Xerxes: …the storehouse of arrows?

Chorus: Little enough out of so much (βαιά γ' ὡς ἀπὸ πολλῶν).

The implication is that the army is in as sorry a state as the king's ragged robes; these clothes represent the rich material possessions which are another of the key defining features of the Persian king in Greek discourse. The arrival of Xerxes in his rags has already been anticipated by Darius, who earlier told the queen to find her son some suitable clothing as he had ripped his robes in his grief (832-6, cf.

847-8, where the queen says that she intends to bring from the palace some new robes for Xerxes). Perhaps even more significantly here, Xerxes has returned with an apparently empty quiver and there is no mention of his bow. The absence of the weapons customarily used by the Greeks to define the Persians here is highly significant; the loss of his bow and arrows symbolises not only Xerxes' loss of his army but also the erosion of his own identity. The emptying of his quiver mirrors also the emptying out of Asia by the king; Darius says at 761 that the entire city of Susa has been emptied out as never before.[50] Thus, as Bacon (1961, p. 3) has pointed out, the reference to the emptying of Xerxes' quiver 'makes it part of a complex of symbols of outpouring, squandering, draining, which are both an emotional and a moral statement about Xerxes'. Xerxes later reaffirms the reason for his sorry state, telling the Chorus, 'I ripped my gown because of the disaster which happened' (1030). He goes on to complete the analogy between his loss of men and his ripped garments by using the word γυμνός, 'bare', or 'naked', to refer to the loss of his escorts.[51]

So, it seems, the great Persian king has been stripped bare in all respects, debilitated and exposed by the playwright as wholly insubstantial.[52] The removal of Xerxes' defining attributes, his vast resources and his material wealth, serves to obliterate the king still further; he seems, in the final scene, even less substantial than the shadow to which we were accustomed before his appearance on stage. The literary erasure of Xerxes perhaps mirrors in a sense what the

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[50] We might contrast here the emptying out of Athens before Salamis which was a matter of pride for the Athenians. See Harrison 2000, pp. 71-2.

[51] 1036: γυμνός εἰμι προπομπῶν: 'I am stripped bare of escorts.'

[52] Thalmann 1980, pp. 267-70 discusses the significance of the emphasis on the Persians' rich clothing (and its removal or destruction), suggesting that 'Because fine robes are a sign of royal station and power, their tatters ought to stand for the loss of that power' (p. 270).

Greeks felt they had done in the sea at Salamis and on the battlefield at Plataea; they had killed his entourage and taken his possessions as spoil, thus depriving the king of all that they perceived as identifying him. Ironically, however, Aeschylus has done anything but lay bare the true character of Xerxes; the Persian king remains an enigma, brought to us only through the Greek perception of his personality. The resulting portrayal is the product of a combination of a fundamental lack of knowledge of the Persian king on the part of the Greeks and a desire, whether conscious or unconscious, to marginalise him as far as possible. The *Persae* thus demonstrates that from the outset Xerxes was an enigma as far as the Greeks were concerned – and that was how he would remain.

CHAPTER THREE

Silencing the Barbarian: The Herodotean Perspective

Although Herodotus' historiographical and ethnographic investigation of Persian matters was not the only such work from the fifth century, his is the only one to have survived. The evidence shows that other writers around this time demonstrated a similar interest in eastern history and customs. We know, for example, that Hellanicus of Lesbos wrote a wide range of ethnographic works ranging from areas in Greece to foreign countries including Persia. Charon of Lampsacus is said by the Suda to have written, among other things, a *Persica* in two books.[1] It is, however, impossible to deduce from the scant remains of the works of these authors whether they dealt with Xerxes in any detail. In Herodotus' work, the figure of Xerxes, as leader of the second Persian invasion, is more fully explored than in any other extant account of the Persian Wars.

The action of the campaign appears at first glance to be driven by the desires of this ruthless and ambitious oriental despot whose quest for imperial expansion and revenge against Athens is the starting point of the narrative of Herodotus' final three books. It might, therefore, be natural to assume that the Persian king himself would be the central figure for much of the story in this section of the *Histories*. On closer examination, however, it becomes clear that, whilst Xerxes does indeed feature repeatedly in the narrative his actual influence on events and position in relation to the action is often marginalised; where we may expect a domineering presence we frequently find a shadowy figure whose personality is

[1] On the contemporaries of Herodotus see Fowler 1996.

reduced to a series of clichés and who, far from being instrumental in the invasion of Greece, often acts as little more than a puppet who carries out the wishes of others. Xerxes is here seen within what Hartog has described as a 'rhetoric of otherness' (1988, see especially pp. 212-59) by which Herodotus conveys to his audience a sense of the difference of non-Greek from Greek peoples. Hartog writes (1988, p. 375) that, 'The history of the Persian Wars, for its part, places the "we" on stage altogether explicitly, in the struggle against "them", and, as it does so it constructs for "us" a representation of the recent past and elaborates a new collection of memories centred on the *Hellenikon*.' We might say that within this binary opposition of self and other Xerxes provides the most extreme example of otherness which is possible.

Against this background the Xerxes we find in Herodotus bears some similarities to the character found in Aeschylus' play. As seen in the *Persae*, Herodotus' Xerxes displays all of the characteristics of the typical barbarian tyrant. Surrounded by the luxurious trappings of empire, he rules over a nation of slaves who are utterly subject to him; ill-tempered and cruel, he disregards the gods of the Greeks and, in crossing the Hellespont to invade Greece, commits the ultimate offence against those gods. Many of the motifs used in the story of the invasion are strikingly similar to those found in Aeschylus' play. It must be stressed here, however, that this is not to suggest that Herodotus derived his material specifically from Aeschylus; rather, the similarities between the two sources would seem to suggest that in the fifth century there came into being a pool of material relating to the figure of Xerxes which could be drawn on by writers in any genre. Herodotus was thus very much a product of his time – the

fact that he did not originate from Athens but rather from Halicarnassus in Ionian Greece serves to demonstrate that the tales seem to have had relevance throughout the Greek world.[2] The extensive scope of the *Histories* also means that we find here in far more detail a range of alternative methods of portraying the barbarian king; along with the by now stereotypical image of the barbarian despot there are also elements in the story of Xerxes which are not seen elsewhere or which are presented to us in greater detail than in any other account. Never, however, is an objective 'reality' possible; Xerxes remains essentially intangible and the images with which we are presented here are, as ever, telescoped through decades of Greek self-congratulation and anti-Persian bias.

The brutal barbarian

> We did not carry out this deed, but it was the gods and heroes, who begrudged that one man, impious and wicked (ἀνόσιόν τε καὶ ἀτάσθαλον), should be king of both Asia and Europe; a man who makes no distinction between the sacred and the secular, who burned and destroyed the statues of the gods, and who whipped and fettered the sea (ὃς καὶ τὴν θάλασσαν ἀπεμαστίγωσε πέδας τε κατῆκε).

So speaks Themistocles to the Greeks after Salamis (8.109.3), giving voice to a picture of the brutal, sacrilegious and hybristic despot who remains at the core of

[2] The issue of Herodotus' Athenocentricity, in spite of his non-Athenian origin, still remains open to question. Much has been made of his comment at 7.139.5 that the Athenians were responsible for the repulse of the Persians from Greece. Evans 1979 (a) has noted that the historian is fair to Sparta too, however, and also (p. 117) that he does not simply act as a mouthpiece for Athenian propaganda; for example, Herodotus comments at 8.3.2 that the Athenians made Pausanias' arrogance a pretext for their assumption of the Greek leadership after the Persian Wars. Thomas 2000, pp. 10-16 demonstrates that although Athens was the economic and cultural centre of the Aegean at this time, Ionia (although *politically* dependent on Athens) had not lost its *cultural* independence; this mix of cultures formed the intellectual world of which Herodotus was a part.

Herodotus' portrayal of Xerxes. Here again is the formidable figure who brought terror to the Greeks whom he intended to enslave. Once again, the picture of Xerxes we see here is a result of his being constructed as the antithesis of the virtuous Greek; this is the filter through which we receive our information. Herodotus builds up his picture of the evil tyrant by way of several anecdotes, each a snapshot of Xerxes' barbarity; many of these anecdotes were to find their way into the later traditions concerning Xerxes. The very first mention of the king in the *Histories* is one which foreshadows much later discourse concerning his role as destroyer of all things sacred; at 1.183.3 Xerxes is said to have stolen a sacred golden statue from a temple in Babylon, and to have killed the priest who tried to stop him from doing so.[3] It is, of course, in Herodotus' account of Xerxes' invasion of Greece, however, that the full force of Xerxes' monstrousness becomes apparent; his impiety reaches its height with the sack of Athens, culminating in the slaughter of those who sought sanctuary in the temple on the acropolis, and the burning of the sacred site (8.53.2).

Throughout the course of the invasion, the wrath of the king also manifests itself against particular individuals, who become the personal victims of Xerxes' invasion. The first casualties are the men responsible for the construction of the original bridges across the Hellespont, which are destroyed by a storm; these unfortunate individuals have their heads cut off on the orders of Xerxes (7.35.3). It is in the story of Pythius the Lydian, however, where we see perhaps the finest

[3] The image of Xerxes as remover (and destroyer) of sacred objects is one which is noteworthy in the later works of Strabo (see below, pp. 210-11) and Pausanias (pp. 271-6) in particular. The 'guidebook' style in which Herodotus is writing on Babylon here foreshadows these 'geographical' works in which Xerxes' impact on the material environment is of particular significance.

Herodotean illustration of Xerxes' cruelty. At 7.27-29, Xerxes had seen fit to reward Pythius generously for his hospitality in entertaining the Persian army en route to Greece and for his offer of financial assistance for the campaign. Shortly afterwards, however, Pythius requests that Xerxes should spare his eldest son from taking part in the expedition. Xerxes' reaction demonstrates his terrifying potential for inconsistency; he flies into a furious rage, and has the son in question cut in half so that the army can march between the two halves (7.38-39).[4] This kind of cruelty is both callous and exhibitionist and perhaps reaches its peak in Xerxes' display of anger against Leonidas after Thermopylae (7.238). Then, we are told, the Persian king ordered the Spartan leader's head to be cut off and fixed on a stake; this goes against the usual practice even of Persians, says Herodotus, as they, more than any others, honour men who have died in war (7.238.2).

The outrageous behaviour continues as Xerxes' anger manifests itself time and again. Herodotus tells us (8.86.1) that at Salamis the men in the Persian fleet did their best through fear of Xerxes as they knew he was watching them; this is painfully borne out by the story of the Phoenician sailors there who lose their ships and try to claim that this was a result of the Ionians' treachery (8.90). Xerxes, on seeing an Ionian ship fighting particularly well, vents his wrath on the Phoenicians by having their heads cut off, in a gesture of extreme barbarism. His

[4] On Xerxes' fickleness see also the story of Sataspes at 4.43. This man had raped a granddaughter of Magabazus and was to be impaled as punishment, but Xerxes was persuaded by Sataspes' mother to spare him on the grounds that she would inflict a more severe punishment, namely the circumnavigation of Libya. Xerxes agreed, and Sataspes was away for several months but failed to complete the circumnavigation; on his return he told Xerxes that he had been unable to make further progress because his ship had been unable to sail any further. Xerxes, however, still exacted the original punishment of impaling.

irrationality continues even on the journey home from Greece; in an alternative version of Xerxes' retreat related at 8.118, Herodotus recounts Xerxes' crossing of the Hellespont in a ship. When a storm arises, Xerxes asks the captain how they can survive it; the response is that the only way is to get rid of some of the men on board. Xerxes persuades the Persian nobles accompanying him to jump overboard to their deaths. On arriving safely ashore, Xerxes is said to have rewarded the captain with a gold crown for saving his life, and then promptly cut off his head as punishment for causing the other Persians' death! Although Herodotus doubts the truth of this version, the motif of Xerxes' inconsistent and frightening behaviour (with beheading as a favoured form of punishment) is a common one, clearly extracted from the general pool of stories relating to the Persian king.

Such cruelty is seen within the context of Xerxes' being Persian, and, as such, antithetical to all that the Greeks stand for and respect. At 7.114, for example, Herodotus describes the Persians' ritual of burying alive nine girls and nine boys at the Nine Ways, en route to Greece; he comments (7.114.2) that 'Burying people alive is something Persians do', and goes on to refer to a similar act committed by Xerxes' wife, Amestris. As a generic characteristic of Persians (as seen by Greeks), such cruelty reaches its peak in the figure of the king himself, who provides the ultimate example of Persian despotism. A similar phenomenon has been observed by Said (1995, pp. 59-60) in relation to Islam as perceived in Europe from the early Middle Ages on; the vast extent of the Islamic conquests in the East terrified the Christian West, and thus, Islam came to symbolise 'terror, devastation, the demonic, hordes of hated barbarians' (p. 59).

On one particular occasion in Herodotus' narrative, however, we do catch a glimpse of Xerxes as displaying some compassion. When he counts his troops at Abydus (7.44-46) there is a brief flicker of humanity on the part of the king, as he weeps for the transient nature of human life. He tells Artabanus (7.46.2), 'As I was thinking, it occurred to me to feel compassion that human life is so short, and that, of so many men, none of them will still be alive in a hundred years' time.' In this spark of wisdom attributed to Xerxes, we perhaps see a glimpse of an alternative type of barbarian king, the wise leader; the story of Cyrus and Croesus, related earlier by Herodotus, contains similar wisdom on the mortality of humanity. There (1.86-87), as Croesus is about to be burned on a pyre by Cyrus after the sack of Sardis, both men reflect upon their own mortality. Croesus recalls the wisdom of Solon, that no man should be called happy until he dies, and Cyrus is prompted to reflect that he, a mere human being, is about to burn alive another mortal who was once as prosperous as he; as a result, Croesus is saved from death. In the case of Xerxes, however, the flash of insight into the instability of life is fleeting and we are led to conclude that his only sorrow is for the fact that his own power will be short-lived; worldly possessions do not last for ever. As Artabanus continues to reflect upon the delicate balance of human fortune Xerxes soon dismisses his thoughts, saying to his adviser (7.47.1), 'Let us stop, and not give heed to disagreeable matters, since there are pleasant things at hand'; within a few chapters, the king is counting his troops again, this time at Doriscus (7.59-60).

Later, we are offered another momentary insight into a possible alternative mode of behaviour for Xerxes. At 7.135-6, two Spartans, Bulis and Sperchias, arrive before Xerxes; they have been sent to him in order to die as atonement for two of Darius' messengers who had earlier been killed by the Spartans. In the first instance this story is used as an illustration of the value set upon freedom by the Greeks as the two men refuse to perform *proskynēsis* before the king. Xerxes, however, displays apparently unaccustomed benevolence in refusing to kill the two men; he announces that he does not intend to behave like the Spartans, who had murdered Darius' messengers. The gesture is less magnanimous than it might at first seem, however, as we are told that part of Xerxes' motivation for sparing Bulis and Sperchias was that he did not wish to absolve the Spartans of responsibility for their crimes; in other words, he wanted them to suffer an undoubtedly more severe divine punishment. Again, however, we have been offered a short-lived glance at Xerxes' potential to be more merciful.

These brief insights into the kind of king who Xerxes might have been serve only to re-emphasise his tyrannical nature as seen elsewhere in the *Histories*. Waters (1971, pp. 77-82) has attempted to rehabilitate the Herodotean Xerxes by demonstrating that in places Herodotus appears not to show hostility towards the king. He notes, for example (p. 79), the king's generosity towards faithful friends and servants, which again provide glimpses of the wise king who Xerxes might have been. As in the case of the Abydos incident, however, such flashes of wisdom serve to point up the contrast with the brutality of Xerxes as seen elsewhere. It possible too that these stories originated in sources less hostile to the Persian king at the time Herodotus composed his *Histories*; as such they may

be remnants of something closer to a Persian tradition. The fact that such hints of the positive gradually became buried altogether beneath Greek bias lends an insight into the early development of the Xerxes-tradition.[5]

The images of Xerxes as a loathsome and brutal tyrant which we have seen of course go hand in hand with the notion that he was already ruler of a slave empire and, moreover, bent on the enslavement of Greece. The Thebans who defect to Persia at Thermopylae are treated like the rest of Xerxes' subjects and, on the king's orders, are branded with the royal mark (κελεύσαντος Ξέρξεω ἔστιξαν στίγματα βασιλήια, 7.233.2), which defines them as the king's possessions. Steiner, in her 1994 study of the symbolism of writing in ancient Greece, has identified such activity as being a key part of the imagery relating to eastern tyrants in the Greek sources; the need to mark out territory, objects and even people in such a way is seen as distinctly representative of the foreign.[6] The key point about mutilation of the body is that for Greeks this was something done only to slaves, not to free men. Xerxes performs such acts of defacement of the body – including, for example, beheading, as seen in the case of the Phoenicians and the sea captain – arbitrarily, and in this way treats all kinds of people as slaves.

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[5] Another glimpse of a more admirable Xerxes is seen at 7.43.1-2, where the king sacrifices a thousand oxen to the Trojan Athena before crossing to Greece. This respect for local religion contrasts with the dominant image of Xerxes as destroyer of all things sacred. It may also, however, be an early hint of the comparison which was drawn between Greece's Persian and Trojan enemies in, for example, the catalogues of Athenian exploits in fourth-century funeral oratory.

[6] On the marking and mutilation of the body as a symbol of despotic power in Herodotus, see Steiner 1994, pp. 154-9 in particular, as well as Hartog 1988, pp. 332-4.

Of course, the key motif relating to Xerxes as a ruler over slaves is that of the Hellespontine crossing. We have already noted the significance of this in Aeschylus' version of the Xerxes-story (see above, pp. 36-7), but Herodotus too makes full use of the link between the enslavement of men and the enslavement of nature itself. As in Aeschylus' play, yoking metaphors are utilised by Herodotus in his descriptions of the Hellespont bridge; the verb ζεύγνυμι is first used in relation to Mardonius' reference to the Hellespont crossing at 7.6.4, and shortly afterwards Xerxes announces, 'I intend to yoke the Hellespont and take an army through Europe into Greece (μέλλω ζεύξας τὸν Ἑλλήσποντον ἐλᾶν στρατὸν διὰ τῆς Εὐρώπης ἐπὶ τὴν Ἑλλάδα, 7.8.β2)'.[7] This image is carried over into the king's plans for the extension of the Persian empire (7.8.γ3); he intends that 'guilty and innocent alike shall wear the yoke of slavery (δούλιον ζυγὸν)'. In Herodotus' account of the building of the bridges too, these are consistently envisaged as 'yokes' across the water (7.33.1, 34.1, 46.1 and 36.4).

The description of Xerxes' treatment of the Hellespont continues with the usage of the imagery of enslavement; when the first bridge is destroyed by a storm, the king, in his anger, orders that the sea should be given three hundred lashes and for a yoke to be thrown into it (7.35). At the same time those ordered to carry out this 'punishment' are told to chastise the sea with the following words (7.35.2): 'Oh bitter water, your master (δεσπότης τοι) inflicts upon you this punishment, because you did wrong to him, although he did not wrong you. But Xerxes the king will cross you, whether you wish it or not.' In treating the sea as a person, and one who is entirely at his mercy, Xerxes demonstrates his mentality as a

[7] On the usage of ζεύγνυμι and τό ζεῦγος, see above, pp. 37-8.

supreme dictator, whose subjects are merely chattels; at the same time we catch a glimpse of his barbaric and irrational side, as the action is, in Greek eyes, more than a little ridiculous. Later (7.54) the king throws offerings into the Hellespont which Herodotus suspects may be intended to make amends for his treatment of it; this behaviour may well have some origin in Persian ritual, yet, seen by a Greek unused to such forms of worship, seems bizarre.

This transgression of the boundaries of nature is also a clear manifestation of Xerxes' hybristic tendencies.[8] As such it is linked too with the canal built at the isthmus near Mount Athos (7.22-23) and designed to channel the sea through a land mass so that the Persian fleet could sail through it. Just as Xerxes thought that he could turn sea into land so too the land was turned into sea by way of this engineering feat. Herodotus concludes that the Athos project was unnecessary, and was, therefore, simply an ostentatious gesture on Xerxes' part, commenting (7.24.1), 'Having considered it, I reckon that Xerxes ordered the digging only out of arrogance (μεγαλοφροσύνης εἵνεκεν), wishing to display his power and to leave a monument to himself.' Again, the alteration of nature is seen as a manifestation of despotic megalomania which seems to stop at nothing.

Xerxes at a distance

The ostentation displayed in the Hellespont and Athos incidents is of course also reflected in the physical trappings of Xerxes' kingship, as seen in Herodotus'

[8] Immerwahr 1966, p. 293, sees such crossings of stretches of water or rivers as a linking motif of the *Histories*, arguing that they are used always to indicate the hybris of the aggressive party. See also Immerwahr 1954, p. 28 n. 22 for a list of examples.

account of the Persian invasion. In relation to Xerxes' army numbers feature as heavily as in Aeschylus' portrayal, undoubtedly reflecting the very real fear which Greeks must have felt at his onslaught. The epigram cited by Herodotus as having been composed for the Thermopylae dead cites three million as the number of Xerxes' forces (7.228.1). Herodotus himself describes the army as greater than any other which was known (7.20.2), dwarfing even that which Darius took on his Scythian campaign;[9] he goes on to say that he took every Asian race with him to Greece and that, except for the great rivers, every stream was drunk dry by the army (7.21.1).[10] Later in the story of the expedition, Herodotus puts the number of Persian land forces at 1 700 000 (7.60.1) and tells us that the navy consisted of 1207 triremes, as well as transport ships (7.89.1);[11] he devotes a total of thirty-nine chapters (7.61-99) to relating the various contingents of the army and fleet, reinforcing this impression of the vast number of men and resources at Xerxes' command. At 7.40-42, we are told of the appearance of the army on the march; it is perhaps significant that Xerxes marches in the middle of his troops, rather than at the front. This positioning gives the impression that the king is cocooned by his men, if not himself dwarfed by their very mass.[12] Later, at 7.55, Herodotus again recounts the order of the march with Xerxes once more in the middle. Here he also refers to a variant account in which the king crossed the Hellespont last (7.55.3); still, there is no sign that the king ever actually leads the army.

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[9] See below, pp. 91-2, for discussion of the Scythian expedition.
[10] Cf. 7.108.2, where the river Lisus is said to have been drunk dry by Xerxes' men, and 7.109.2 where the lake at Pistyrus is drained by the pack-animals alone.
[11] On the question of Herodotus' veracity concerning Persian numbers, see Briant 2000, p. 527.
[12] For a similar effect seen in Aeschylus' *Persae*, see above, pp. 40-2.