THE ESSENTIAL

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Translation, Introduction, and Annotations
by
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# *Brief Contents*

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# *Preface*

My first exposure to Herodotus was as a boy, when I picked up a volume called *The Portable Greek Historians*, put together many years ago by Moses Finley. It was not until some years later, when I first came to study Herodotus in Greek, that I became aware of how deeply misleading was Finley's handy volume, which effectively made Herodotus's work a rather straightforward history of the Persian War, albeit with a bit of storytelling at the front, and some fun facts about Egypt in the middle.

But Finley's book *was* handy, and, like Finley, I hope by offering a volume with selections (instead of the daunting 700-page whole) to serve a broad audience of those who are curious about the first history written in the west, or curious about ancient Greece, or just plain curious. The selections attempt to give a rich and balanced sense of what the whole of the history is like, and the brief comments and many maps and illustrations are designed to help guide the reader who may feel a bit at sea in such novel materials. I have, in short, tried to take my lifetime of study of our first historian and produce a guided tour to what is surely one of the most fascinating works to survive from antiquity.

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# *About the Translator*

WILLIAM A. JOHNSON, Professor of Classical Studies at Duke University, works broadly in the cultural history of Greece and Rome. He has lectured and published on Herodotus, Hesiod, Plato, Cicero, Pliny (both Elder and Younger), Gellius, and Lucian, and on a variety of topics relating to books and readers, both ancient and modern. His books include *Readers and Reading Culture in the High Empire: A Study of Elite Reading Communities* (Oxford, 2010); *Ancient Literacies* (with Holt Parker; Oxford, 2009), *Bookrolls and Scribes in Oxyrhynchus* (Toronto, 2004).

# *Introduction*

> In history everything is directed toward getting at the truth, while in poetry most things are directed to giving pleasure; however (it must be said) there are countless fabulous tales in **Herodotus, the Father of History**. . . .
>
> —CICERO, *DE LEGIBUS 1.5*

*How can someone write history before the idea of writing history has been invented?* This question animates, directly or indirectly, a deep wellspring of modern scholarship, as we try to understand better the aims and methods of the great work by Herodotus, the "father of history"—that is, the man who first, to our knowledge, wrote a "history" recognizable as such. This question is also behind much of what makes first-time readers of Herodotus as perplexed as they are charmed. Why in a *history* do we have stories of the mythic heroines Helen and Medea, of Arion miraculously saved by a dolphin, of the fairytale thieves who trick the Egyptian Pharaoh? Why in a *history* do we have scientific analysis of the origins of the Nile's flooding, lengthy catalogues of bizarre barbarian customs, descriptions of animals that include not simply the peculiarities of crocodile and hippopotamus, but gold-digging ants and winged serpents whose bones Herodotus claims to have seen himself?

Herodotus does not claim to *write history*: that had not yet been invented. What he claims is to "present to the public" a *historiê*, the Greek word that means "inquiry" or "investigation" or "researches" and from which our word *history* derives. In trying to understand what Herodotus is up to, the centrality of the concept of *historiê* is important to bear in mind. What we are getting is the staging, as it were, of an active inquiry or investigation into certain matters. What those matters are will become clearer as you work into the text; and while they include elements that are like history as we tend to think of it (by which I mean, especially, traditional political and military history), you will also find a much broader set of interests that motivate this active inquiry, a set of interests that finds relevance and meaning in affairs far beyond politics and military campaigns. Moreover, you will come to know (and to enjoy immensely) the active inquirer, that genial and rather sly persona that Herodotus adopts as he "presents"—stages—his own struggles to wrestle this enormous mass of knowledge into shape, and thereby to extract significance and, at times, deep meaning.

But how can it be that *history* is something that someone invents? Isn't the *historical* what it is? The answer to that is yes and no. True, the people are real

(for the most part) and the situations (for the most part) are real too: Xerxes is an historical Persian king, and the conflict between Greeks and Persians known as the Persian War did happen. We may quibble on any number of details, or even quarrel over major events or outcomes, and we may further take the stand that the "truth" of these details and events is unrecoverable, but all will still agree that there exist real details, events, and outcomes to argue over and try to recover. But the moment the historian sits down to *write history*, that is a different matter. A historian creates a *narrative* that selectively presents evidence and from analysis of that evidence inferences and conclusions are drawn. To create a massive catalogue of every detail we know about each person and event, no matter how trivial (darning of socks, eating of meals, stray conversation), for all those Americans whose testimony survives for the period 1861–1865 may be the stuff from which a history could be made, but it is not the writing of history. A military history asserts that there was a great war then, either the Civil War or the War between the States (two tellingly different options), which was fought for one or several reasons, including economic clashes, political intransigence, outrage at slavery, and so forth. A social history asserts a point of focus, let's say slavery, and arranges in some comprehensible fashion some of the ways by which slaves and the social institution, slavery, responded to the changing circumstances of the war and its many pressures and developments. An economic history might use data that show how meals and other contingencies changed over the course of the war, but that history will not simply list the meals, transactions, and other bits of evidence: it will construct from those many bits an argument, a *narrative*. None of this means that a good history is uncomplicated or unnuanced. But a history simply has to select what evidence is useful, what evidence is telling, and needs then to signal what the evidence suggests, to draw conclusions, however ambiguous or fragile, in a narrative that is coherent. That is a different matter from marshaling a raw array of "facts," even while we also now understand better, in our hyper-politicized world, how "facts" too can be variously constructed and construed.

We must be clear, then, that Herodotus is not claimed to have invented *history*, but rather is claimed (rightly or wrongly) to have invented the western tradition of *writing history*. Those who study this are studying *historiography*, literally the writing (*-graphy*) of history. What distinguishes Herodotus's writing are certain features that will quickly establish themselves as essential historical conventions, such as the focus on real-world events, the setting of events on a well-defined timeline, the collecting and reasoned analysis of evidence so as to establish the "facts," the attention to the causes and outcomes of events, the presentation of the whole as a coherent prose narrative in (roughly) chronological order. There are antecedents for many of the parts, as we shall see—the handling of the narrative, in particular, owes a great deal to the *Iliad*—but the whole seems to be something new, and is the basis for

Thucydides' decisive intervention, after which the conventions of western historical narrative are firmly set.

Herodotus's overall purpose is defined at the front of the work: *so that time not erase what man has brought into being, and so that the great and marvelous deeds, manifested both by Greeks and by barbarians, not be without glory—and in particular to answer the question, for what reason these peoples came to war against one another.* The fighting he mentions is the Persian War, a war of great importance to the Greeks, since it demonstrated their ability to fight back an enormously powerful invader, and led directly to Greek control over large parts of the eastern Mediterranean—which in turn led to the great economic and cultural expansion that we call the rise of Athens or, less admiringly, the Athenian Empire. For the Greeks, the defeat of the Persians and the economic and cultural advancement in its wake is of a piece with what come to be central ideas of Greekness: high ability in warfare, high attainment in matters cultural, willingness to fight for freedom.

Of the man, Herodotus, aside from what we can infer from his writings, we know little: merely that he was born in the city of Halicarnassus in Caria, on the southwestern coast of present-day Turkey, and that he seems to have emigrated to a Greek colony in what is now south Italy, in a town called Thurii, where perhaps he died. His life, then, spanned the Mediterranean, beginning at the far east of the area influenced by the Greeks, and ending far to the west. From his work, we can infer that he traveled widely (although how widely is debated). He writes as though he did not fight in the Persian War (480–479 BC), but he was able to interview people who had; the latest secure reference in his work is 430 BC. Scholarly consensus makes him a boy or youth at the time of the war, and we guess that his life span was roughly from about the 480s to the 420s BC. Many (including myself) think it important that he wrote his work during the run-up to and start (431 BC) of the Peloponnesian War, that grim, protracted struggle between the two great Greek city-states, Athens and Sparta. It is also important to bear in mind that Herodotus is neither Athenian nor Spartan, and that, while there is no Greek "nation" in antiquity, he assumes a loose commonality of identity among "the Greeks," who include not only Greek speakers of the mainland and Aegean islands (current-day Greece), but also Greek speakers along what is now the Turkish coast (Ionia). Greek speakers in this world view are opposed to those whose speech sounds like *bar-bar-bar,* that is, the barbarians. In this time, the dominant state among the barbarians was, of course, that of the Persians, whose empire was the largest yet created.


**MAP 1**


**MAP 2**

# *Central Persons in Herodotus*

*The chapter number at the end of each entry refers to the passage where the person is introduced, or where his or her most notable action occurs.*

**Arion** (*a-reye'-on*). A celebrated citharode who was forced to jump overboard by thieving sailors, but who was saved when a dolphin, sent it seems by Apollo, appeared and carried him to land. (1.23)

**Aristagoras** (*a-ri-sta'-goh-ras*). The tyrant of Miletus who started the Ionian Revolt. (5.97)

**Artabanus** (*ar-ta-bay'-nus*). Uncle and wise advisor to Xerxes. (7.10)

**Artemisia** (*ar-te-mee'-si-a*). Queen of Halicarnassus who captained a ship in Xerxes' fleet and through a combination of scheming and wisdom became one of his trusted advisors. (8.68)

**Astyages** (*a-steye'-a-jeez*). The brutal despot who ended the line of Median kings; he was overthrown by Cyrus the Great. (1.107)

**Atys** (*a'-tis*). The son of Croesus whose life was accidentally taken by the stranger Adrastus, who had sworn to protect him. (1.34)

**Cambyses** (*cam-beye'-seez*). King of Persia after Cyrus. He attacked and conquered Egypt, but in the course of the campaign went mad. He died on his way back to Susa to suppress a revolt by the False Smerdis. (3.1)

**Croesus** (*croy'-sus or cree'-sus*). King of Lydia, legendary for his wealth. He built a mighty empire but then made the mistake of attacking the Persians. His empire was conquered and absorbed by Cyrus the Great, after which he became a wise advisor to the Persian court. (1.26)

**Cyrus** (*seye'-rus*). Cyrus the Great was the first of the Persian kings. He overthrew the dynasty of the Medes by deposing Astyages. (1.108)

**Darius** (*da-reye'-us*). Darius the Great followed Cambyses as king of Persia. He was one of the Seven who detected the schemes of the Magi when they seized power; the Seven seized power back, and through various maneuverings Darius became the new king. In the Constitutional Debate, Darius argued that kingship is the best form of government for Persia. (3.70)

**Deioces** (*day'-oh-seez or dee'-oh-seez*). First king of the Medes, who ironically came into a tyrant's power through his reputation for justice. (1.96)

**Demaratus** (*de-mar-ay'-tus*). Exiled king of Sparta, who attended Xerxes at court and on the march, and was one of a succession of wise advisors to the king. (7.3)

**Ephialtes** (*e-fee'-al-teez*). The Greek from Malis who led Xerxes' soldiers around the mountain at Thermopylae, thus making it possible to surround and defeat Leonidas and his Three Hundred. (7.213)

**Eurybiades** (*yoo-ri-bee'-a-deez*). Spartan commander of the combined Greek naval forces at Artemisium and Salamis. (8.49)

**Gyges** (*geye'-jeez*). A spearman in the Lydian court who through a strange sequence of events brought the kingship to the Mermnads, the clan of Croesus. (1.8)

**Harpagus** (*har-pa'-gus*). Aristocrat and steward under King Astyages, who was commanded by the king to kill the baby Cyrus. (1.108)

**Helen of Troy** (*he'-len*). Legendary queen of Sparta and wife of Menelaus; her seduction by Alexander (also known as Paris) led to the Trojan War. (1.3)

**Hippias** (*hip'-pee-as*). Son of the Athenian tyrant Peisistratus who assisted the Persian forces at Marathon. (6.107)

**Histiaeus** (*hi-sti-eye'-us*). The scheming tyrant of Miletus who both kept the bridge intact for Darius's retreat from Scythia and worked to start the Ionian Revolt. (4.137, 6.1)

**Leonidas** (*le-oh'-nee-das*). Spartan king who led the Three Hundred at the battle of Thermopylae. (7.204)

**Mardonius** (*mar-doh'-ni-us*)**.** A son of one of the Seven (Gobryas), he acted as an infantry general both under Darius, before Marathon, and under Xerxes, where he goaded Xerxes to invade and, later, assumed the command when Xerxes returned to Asia. (6.43, 7.5)

**Miltiades** (*mil-tee'-a-deez*). Athenian leader and victorious general at the battle of Marathon. (4.137, 6.109)

**Otanes** (*oh-ta'-neez*). The first of the Seven to divine the scheme of the Magi, by which they had put power into the hands of an imposter. In the Constitutional Debate (3.80), Otanes argued against monarchy and advocated that the Seven set up a democratic government in Persia. (3.68)

**Peisistratus** (*pay-si'-stra-tus*). Early and mostly beneficent tyrant of Athens, who through various schemes seized the tyranny three times. His descendants, known as the **Peisistratids**, continued to advocate for tyranny, and thus showed up repeatedly at the Persian court. (1.59)

**Psammetichus** (*psam-me'-ti-kus*). 7th-century BC Egyptian king who created an experiment to find out which people were the oldest. (2.2)

**Smerdis** (*smer'-dis*). The real Smerdis was Cambyses' brother, whom he had murdered. The "False Smerdis" was one of the Magi, who briefly seized control of the Persian empire by pretending to be Cambyses' brother at a time when Cambyses had gone mad. The False Smerdis was overthrown by the Seven. (3.30)

**Solon** (*soh'-lon*). An Athenian statesman famous for his wisdom, who journeyed to Sardis and offered advice to King Croesus. (1.29)

**Themistocles** (*the-mis'-toh-kleez*). A powerful and controversial leader of Athens, who commanded the Athenian part of the Greek fleet and through rhetoric and scheming drove the Greek strategy at Salamis. (8.57)

**Tomyris** (*toh-meye'-ris*). Queen of the Massagetae, who defeated and killed Cyrus when he invaded their territory. (1.205)

**Xerxes** (*zer-xeez*). King of Persia after Darius, who carried on and implemented Darius's plan to invade Greece. (7.2)

**THE GREAT KINGS OF PERSIA (THE ACHAEMENIDS)**

| Name | Lifetime | Reign | Patrimony |
|---|---|---|---|
| Cyrus the Great (Cyrus II) | 600–530 BC | 559–530 BC | Son of Cambyses I |
| Cambyses (Cambyses II) | ?–522 BC | 530–522 BC | Son of Cyrus the Great |
| Darius the Great (Darius I) | 550–486 BC | 522–486 BC | Son of Hystaspes |
| Xerxes (Xerxes I) | 519–465 BC | 486–465 BC | Son of Darius the Great |
| Artaxerxes (Artaxerxes I) | ?–424 BC | 465–424 BC | Son of Xerxes |

# *Timeline*

| | GREECE | PERSIA, NEAR EAST, EGYPT |
|---|---|---|
| **ARCHAIC PERIOD 750–490 BC** | | |
| c. 750 | Overseas colonization of western Mediterranean begins | |
| | *Iliad* and *Odyssey* composed (c. 750–675) | |
| 700 | | Deioces becomes king of the Medes |
| 687 | | Beginning of the Lydian empire (687–546) under Gyges |
| 664 | | Psammetichus I (r. 664–610) becomes pharaoh, and establishes Naucratis on the Nile as a permanent Greek trading station |
| 630 | Sappho born in Lesbos | |
| 612 | | Beginning of the Median empire (612–550) under Cyaxares after capture of Nineveh |
| c. 600 | Beginnings of science and philosophy (the "Presocratics") | Lydians are the first to mint coins |
| 594 | Solon's reforms in Athens give rise to limited democracy in Athens | |
| 569 | | Amasis (r. 569–526) becomes pharaoh, and establishes close relations with Greeks as Persian power threatens |
| 561 | The beginning of tyranny in Athens under Peisistratus; he and his sons will rule Athens until 514 | |
| 560 | | Croesus becomes king of Lydia (r. 560–546) |
| 559 | | Cyrus I (the Great) becomes king of the Persians (r. 557–530) |

| | GREECE | PERSIA, NEAR EAST, EGYPT |
|---|---|---|
| 550 | | Cyrus I defeats the Median king Astyages; he now rules the Medes as well as the Persians |
| | | Beginning of the Achaemenid Persian Empire (550–330) |
| | Sparta becomes the dominant power in the Peloponnese | |
| 546 | | Cyrus defeats Croesus at Sardis and adds Lydia to his empire |
| 539 | | Cyrus defeats Babylonian army at Opis and adds Babylonia to his empire |
| 530 | | Cyrus dies in battle and his son Cambyses II becomes king of Persia (r. 530–522) |
| 526 | | Cambyses launches his attack on Egypt; Pharaoh Amasis dies and his son Psammenitus ascends to the throne |
| 525 | | Cambyses conquers Egypt, capturing the new pharaoh Psammenitus, and adds Egypt to his empire |
| 522 | | Cambyses dies without an heir |
| 521 | | Darius I (the Great) emerges as the Persian king (r. 521–486) |
| 518 | | Darius begins the building of Persepolis, a new capital for the empire |
| 513 | | Darius attacks Scythia |
| 510 | Cleisthenes expels the tyrants from Athens and in 507 institutes reforms; democracy takes root | |
| 499 | Outbreak of the Ionian Revolt | |
| 498 | Ionians with the help of Athens burn Sardis | |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 494 | Ionian Revolt winds down (ending in 493) | Persians capture and destroy Miletus, thus restoring rule over Greeks in Ionia |
| 490 | First Persian Invasion: Athenians defeat Datis and his Persian army at Marathon | Darius sends Datis to attack Greece |
| 486 | | Darius' son Xerxes becomes king of Persia (r. 486–465) |
| 485 | | Xerxes crushes rebellions in Egypt and Babylon |
| 480 | Second Persian Invasion: Battles of Thermopylae and Artemisium, capture and burning of Athens, Battle of Salamis | Xerxes attacks Greece |
| 479 | Battles of Plataea and Mycale, end of Persian Wars | Xerxes leaves Greece and marches to Babylonia to crush a rebellion |
| CLASSICAL PERIOD 478–323 BC | | |
| 478 | Formation of the first Delian League, led by Athens | |
| 472 | Aeschylus (525–456) produces the *Persians*, a tragedy about the Persian invasion | |
| 469 | Birth of Socrates (469–399) | |
| 468 | Sophocles (496–406) stages his first tragedy | |
| 465 | | Xerxes assassinated and Artaxerxes I (r. 465–424) assumes the throne |
| 461 | Outbreak of hostilities between Athens and Corinth | |
| 460 | Pericles leads Athens through its "golden era" (c. 460–430) | |
| 449 | Acropolis building program, including construction of the Parthenon (447–432) | |
| 445 | Hostilities end with a 30–years' truce; Athens is at the height of her power | |

| | GREECE | PERSIA, NEAR EAST, EGYPT |
|---|---|---|
| 440s and 430s | Herodotus at work on his history of the Persian War | |
| 431 | Outbreak of the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta | |
| | Thucydides begins work on his history of the Peloponnesian War | |
| 423 | | Darius II (r. 424–404) becomes king of Persia |
| 404 | War ends with Athens defeated, leaving Sparta now as the first power in Greece | |

# THE RESEARCHES *of*
# *Herodotus of Halicarnassus*

# BOOK 1
# *Prologue*

The first sentence ("Herodotus of Halicarnassus here presents to the public his researches . . .") reads much like an epitaph, and acts as the title to the work. It also gives critical signals to the reader as to the contents and program (research, creating a written record, great deeds, glory, causes, war). The exact formulation of the sentence is interesting, since it implicitly announces strong ties to three different genres: (1) the first words, identifying the author in the third person, follow in the tradition of early proto-historians who accumulated lists of peoples and places and their stories; (2) the definition of the core activity as "researches" (*historiê*, the word that will gradually come to mean a "history") signals common cause with proto-scientists who were trying, through collection and analysis, to sort out how the material world works; and (3) the emphasis on preserving "glory" (*kleos*) is the signal goal of the Homeric epics, and thus offers this work as an alternative to poetic memorialization. The narrator is implicitly declaring that he will be doing something quite new that takes over elements from a variety of literary predecessors.

In the section to follow, the narrator characteristically picks up the final phrase of the first sentence ("for what reason these peoples came to war against one another") and turns to examine the question there introduced, the cause of the Persian War. This section—"The Snatchings of Women"—puzzles modern readers, and probably puzzled some ancient ones as well. Several moves are simultaneously in play. The first is to take mythological persons and historicize them as real people involved in an escalating series of kidnappings and retribution. Secondly, though, the narrative does not carry the authority of the narrator ("Herodotus") but is explicitly a report of specific and irreconcilable viewpoints—what the Persians, the Phoenicians, the Greeks say. The third move is a surprise ending: at the conclusion of the narrative, the whole is set aside (in a figure that Classicists call a "priamel") in favor of what the narrator himself can reasonably know. Here at the front, then, there is an implicit discussion of the difficulties inherent in formulating a valid narrative for the distant causes of complex historical events—what we would now think of as a question of historical method.

## Proem: The Opening Sentence

PR. Herodotus of Halicarnassus here presents to the public his researches (*historiê*), so that time not erase what man has brought into being, and so that the great and marvelous deeds, manifested both by Greeks and by barbarians,[1] not be without glory (*kleos*)—and in particular to answer the question, for what reason[2] these peoples came to war against one another.

## The Snatchings of Women

*Some motifs to watch for: the four rounds of attack or reprisal (Io, Europa, Medea, Helen), culminating in a landmark war; the continuing cycle of revenge; the mutability of human fortune. In Greek mythology, Io and Europa are lovers of Zeus subjected to the jealousy of Hera; Medea is a foreign princess seduced by the hero Jason; Helen is the queen of Sparta (wife of Menelaus) seduced by Paris, an act that led to the Trojan War.*

1.1 Among the Persians those who tell the stories of things past[3] say that the Phoenicians were the cause of the quarrel. By their account, the Phoenicians arrived at our Sea[4] from what is called the Red Sea[5] and, settling what is now their homeland, they immediately set about long sea voyages. They transported wares from Egypt and Assyria and traveled to many a land, among them Argos, which at this time was the preeminent power in the territories we now call Greece. To Argos, then, the Phoenicians came and there they set out their wares. On the fifth or sixth day after their arrival, when nearly everything was sold out, quite a few women came down to the seashore, and among them was the king's daughter. Her name—and on this point the Greeks agree—was Io, daughter of Inachus. The women were standing near the stern of the ship, bargaining for the wares their hearts most desired, when the Phoenicians gave the signal and rushed upon them. Most of the women escaped, but Io, along with others, was captured. The Phoenicians (say the Persians)
1.2 loaded them onto the ship and made sail for Egypt. Thus it was that Io came to Egypt. Or so say the Persians, telling a story quite different from the Greeks.[6] This, they say, was the first act of injustice.

Next, they say, certain of the Greeks (whose names they cannot recall) traveled to Phoenicia, to Tyre, and carried off the daughter of the king, Europa.

1 Barbarian, Greek *barbaros*, means people who are not Greek speakers. Non-Greeks tend (from the Greek point of view) to be less civilized, but the essential contrast here is Greek versus non-Greek rather than civilized versus uncivilized.

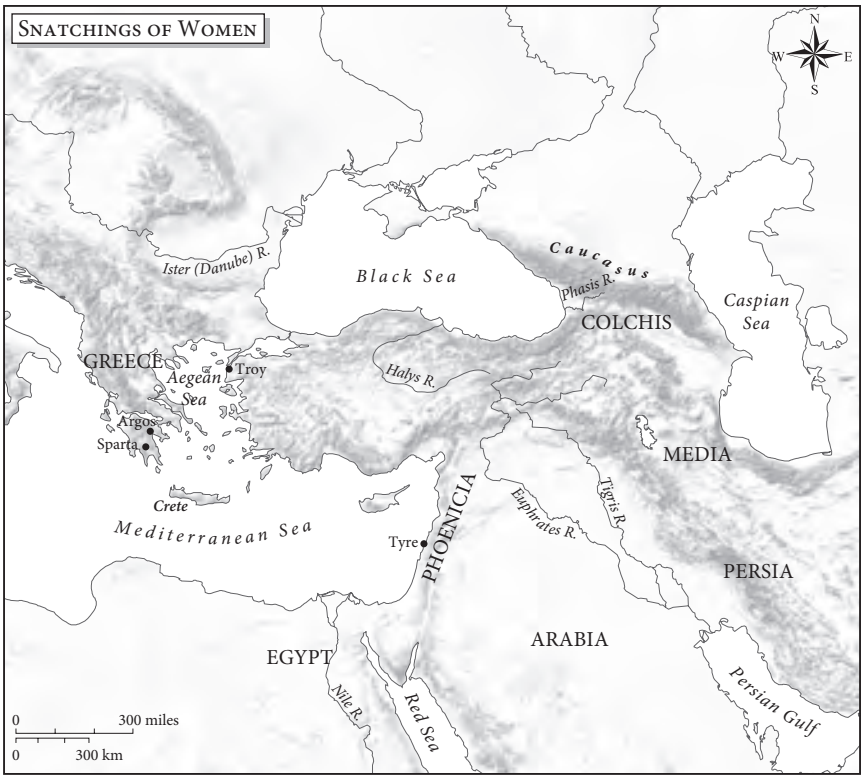
2 The Greek word here, *aitiê*, means the reason or cause, but also the blame and responsibility for an action.

3 These authorities (*logioi* in the Greek) appear to be people specially designated to recall traditional materials, originally and probably also here referring to an oral tradition of cultural memory.

4 The Mediterranean.

5 Herodotus uses *Red Sea* for both our Red Sea and the Persian Gulf; here the latter is meant.

6 In Greek mythology, Io was bedded by Zeus, and then, fleeing a horsefly sent by Hera to torment her, wandered to Egypt in the form of a white cow. There she resumed human form and gave birth to Epaphos, whom the Greeks identified with the Egyptian bull-god Apis.




**MAP 1.1**

These men, then, would have to be the Cretans.[7] And so, up to this point, the score was even.

But after that, say the Persians, the Greeks were to blame for the second act of injustice—for they sailed down in a long ship to Aea, a city in Colchis on the river Phasis, and once they had done what they had come to do, they kidnapped the daughter of the king, Medea.[8] The Colchian king sent a herald to Greece, and demanded both monetary recompense for the kidnapping and the return of his daughter. But in reply the Greeks said that the barbarians had not given reparations for the kidnapping of Io from Argos, and therefore they would give none to the Colchians.

1.3 The Persians go on to say that in the second generation after this, Alexander the son of Priam[9] was inspired by this story, and so wanted to seize a wife

7 In Greek mythology, Zeus came to Europa in Tyre in the form of a beautiful white bull; she climbed on his back, whereupon the bull swam to Crete and there they slept together.

8 "What they had come to do" was to capture the golden fleece: this is the mythological tale of Jason and the Argonauts, in which Jason and the witch-princess Medea fall in love and Jason brings her back to Greece to horrific consequence (murder of her brother, his uncle, their children). In the myth, Medea is the granddaughter of the Sun.

9 An alternate name for Paris, whose seduction and snatching of Helen led to the Trojan War. In mythology, Helen is the daughter of Zeus, king of the gods.

from the Greeks—convinced that he would not have to pay for this any more than the Greeks had. Thus it was that he kidnapped Helen. After deliberation the Greeks first sent a messenger to the Trojans, and demanded both the return of Helen and monetary recompense for the kidnapping. But in reply the Trojans pointed to the kidnapping of Medea, saying that the Greeks had neither given recompense nor given her up when that was demanded. How could they now want reparations from others?

1.4 So far, there were only kidnappings involved, but from this point forward, the Greeks, they say, were greatly to blame. For the Greeks invaded Asia well before the Persians invaded Europe. "In our view," say the Persians, "to kidnap women is wrong, but, once the deed is done, to make it the basis for serious reprisal is foolish—sensible men treat the snatchings of women as affairs of no great moment, since clearly the ladies would not have been captured if they were not willing. We men from Asia make no great matter of these snatchings, while the Greeks for the sake of a single Spartan woman assembled a great force, traveled to Asia, and destroyed the kingdom of Priam.[10] From this moment, the Greeks have always been our enemy." The Persians, you see, claim as their own Asia and the barbarian races dwelling therein; Europe and
1.5 the Greek race they regard as entirely separate. That then is how the Persians say that it came about: the capture of Troy, by their analysis, was the beginning of their enmity against the Greeks.

About Io, however, the Phoenicians disagree with the Persians. They say that they did not kidnap her to take her to Egypt. Rather, in Argos she had slept with the captain of the ship, and when she learned that she was pregnant, ashamed and afraid of her parents, she sailed with the Phoenicians of her own accord, so that she not be found out. Such, then, are the stories of the Persians and Phoenicians.

For my part, I am not going to address these stories, nor opine whether it happened this way or some different way; rather, the man I myself know to have first initiated unjust deeds against the Greeks—this is the man I will focus upon as I work my way into the story. And along the way I will tell of both the small and the great cities of men, since many of those that were great of old are now small, and those that were great in my day were small in the past. Knowing well that human fortune is ever changing, I will record the story of both great and small alike.

10 Priam was the king of Troy at the time of the Trojan War. The Spartan woman is Helen.

# *Croesus and Tales of Lydia*

Croesus is legendarily wealthy ("as rich as Croesus") and was in historical fact king of Lydia in the 6th century BC. We do not know what sources Herodotus had available to him as he tried to put together a depiction of Croesus and his reign. It is possible that Herodotus consulted with chroniclers in the Lydian capital; but Lydia was immediately adjacent to Greek Ionia, and the names and stories and details may well all come from Ionian sources. Certainly an important source was someone close to the oracle of Apollo at Delphi, as we will see.

The way Herodotus strings together his narrative repays study. At first, the initial series of stories—Gyges, Arion, Solon, Atys, and Adrastus—may seem rather random, and like set pieces, designed to entertain more than to inform us about the "history" of the times. Entertain they do, but each story also sets up ("prefigures" is the term scholars use) motifs or themes that will recur, in both the Lydian tales and throughout the *Histories*. The recurrence of these key motifs and themes is critical to providing the reader a sort of road map to how Herodotus's universe works. Power leads, *naturally*, to an urge to expand one's power. Arrogance of power leads, *inevitably*, to a downfall. Divine advice can be beyond human comprehension. Violation of norms leads, *by justice*, to correction. It is hard to tease out how much of this is psychological insight, how much an assertion of historical predictability ("history repeats itself"), and how much an affirmation of divine control over human affairs (meaning both "fate" and "divine justice"). This mix of history, psychology, ethics, and metaphysics makes Herodotus's *Histories* less comfortable as an "historical" text, but also potentially rich—in the manner of literature—in the questions it raises and the provisional answers it provides.


**MAP 1.2**

## Croesus

*Croesus was king of Lydia in c. 560–546 BC. The man "first within my own knowledge" (1.5) thus predates Herodotus by 2–3 generations, which is typical of what modern scholars define as the limits to accuracy for orally transmitted information. Characteristic of the narrative style is the introduction of the focal subject, Croesus, followed immediately by a long detour into the background, which here includes the previous four generations.*

1.6 Croesus was by birth a Lydian, son of Alyattes, and ruler of the peoples this side of the Halys, a river that flows from the south between Syria and Paphlagonia, and drains northward into the sea called the Euxine.[11] This man Croesus was, to my knowledge, the first foreigner to subject Greeks to the paying of tribute, and to make others of the Greeks his allies—his subjects being the Ionians, Aeolians, and Asiatic Dorians, and the Spartans his allies. Before the reign of Croesus, all Greeks were free: for the invasion of the Cimmerians into Ionia, though before Croesus's time, was not really a conquest of the cities, but rather a raid that led to the cities' plunder.

## Gyges and the Wife of Candaules

*Some key motifs: the hubristic claim of the ruler ("fairest woman of them all"); the ruler's rejection of sound guidance from an advisor; the strength of action of the*

11 The Black Sea.

*queen; the transgression of a cultural boundary ("a deep disgrace to be seen naked"); retribution; reliance on the oracle; and the curse that will come to pass in the fifth generation.*

1.7 The royal power, which had belonged to the clan of the Heraclids,[12] passed into the family of Croesus—the clan called the Mermnads—in the following way. Once there was a ruler of Sardis named Candaules (whom the Greeks call Myrsilus), and he was descended from Alcaeus the son of Heracles. In fact the first of the Heraclids to be king of Sardis was Agron son of Ninus son of Belus son of Alcaeus, and Candaules son of Myrsus was the last. Before Agron, those ruling over this land were the descendants of Lydus son of Atys, from whom the entire *Lydian* people are given their name (they were previously known as the Maeonians). From the line of Lydus, the command of an oracle gave control of the kingship to the Heraclids, the descendants of Heracles and a slave-woman belonging to Iardanus. The Heraclids ruled for two and twenty generations of men, five hundred and five years, each son taking up the kingship from his father—up to the time of Candaules son of Myrsus.

1.8 Now this king Candaules fell passionately in love with his own wife, and so much so that he considered his wife much the fairest woman of them all. Among his spearmen there was a particular favorite, Gyges son of Dascylus. Candaules discussed the most important matters with Gyges, and, because he thought so much of his wife, he especially liked to talk about his wife's beauty. Things were destined to work out badly for Candaules, and so after but a little while he said to Gyges, "Gyges, I don't think you believe me when I say how lovely my wife is. Since 'ears are less easily convinced than eyes,'[13] let's arrange it so you can see her naked." Gyges cried out and said, "Master, what a terrible thing to say—that I look upon my own mistress naked! 'A woman without clothes is also without shame.' Long ago rules of propriety were discovered by men, rules that must be taken to heart. Among these rules is this: that a man look to his own. I believe you—she is the most beautiful of all women!—and I beg you: don't ask me to do something so against the customs of our land."

1.9 So saying, he tried to resist, afraid of what terrible things might happen to him. But Candaules answered, "Gyges, you needn't be afraid of me—I am not saying this in order to test you; nor of my wife—no harm will come to you from her. I will work the whole business so that she will never know you have seen her. I will station you behind the open door of the room where we sleep. After I go in my wife too will come to bed. A chair sits near the entrance: on that she will lay her clothes as she takes them off, one by one, and you will have plenty of time to look her over. When she steps from the chair to the bed and her back is turned to you, be careful then that she not see you as you go out the door."

12 The suffix *-id* or *-ad* means "descendants of," thus this clan claimed the Greek hero and demigod Heracles (Roman Hercules) as their ancestor.

13 "Eyes are more accurate witnesses than ears" is a proverbial saying attributed to the Greek wise man Heraclitus (as quoted by Polybius, 12.27), who was active in the generation before Herodotus. The proverb Gyges quotes in return is from an unknown source.

1.10 Not able to get away, Gyges gave his consent. So Candaules, when he decided it was time for bed, brought Gyges to the room. Soon afterward the wife arrived too. Gyges watched as she came in and took off her clothes. When the wife went to bed and her back was turned, he stirred and slipped outside—but the wife saw him as he was going out. She understood then what her husband had done; and yet she neither cried out in her shame nor gave any indication that she knew. For she had resolved to take vengeance on Candaules. Among the Lydians, and indeed among almost all foreign peoples, it is a deep disgrace for even a man to be seen naked.[14]

1.11 For the time being, then, she revealed nothing and held her peace. But as soon as it was day, she got ready the servants particularly loyal to herself, and summoned Gyges. Thinking she knew nothing of what had happened he came when summoned—there was nothing unusual in the queen's calling for him. But when Gyges arrived, the wife said, "Gyges, I am giving you a choice. There are now two paths open to you and you can take whichever you wish. Either kill Candaules and take me as your wife and Lydia as your kingdom, or, to stop you from obeying Candaules in everything and seeing what you shouldn't, you will die at once. One of you must die: either he who contrived this, or you, who looked on me naked and acted against the customs of our land." For a while Gyges was dumbstruck at her words, but then he begged her not to force him to make such a decision. He did not persuade her, though, and he saw that dire necessity truly lay upon him: either his master must die or he himself must die at the hands of others. He decided to live. He then spoke up and asked, "Since you force me to kill my master against my will, come, let me hear in what way we shall make our attack." And she answered, "The assault will be from the very spot where he exposed me naked; and you will attack him as he sleeps."

1.12 The plot was ready, then, and when night fell Gyges followed the wife to the bedchamber—for Gyges was trapped, and there was no way out: either he or Candaules had to die. She gave him a dagger and hid him behind the selfsame door. Later, as Candaules was taking his rest, Gyges slipped out and killed him, and thus came to possess both the wife and the kingship.

1.13 So Gyges gained hold of the kingship,[15] and his rule was made firm by sanction of the oracle at Delphi. That came about like this. The Lydians thought the violent death of Candaules a monstrous business and were up in arms, but the supporters of Gyges and the rest of the Lydians came to an agreement: if the oracle chose him as king of Lydia, he would be king; and if it did not, he would give back the rule to the Heraclids. The oracle in fact chose him, and thus Gyges was made king. The Pythian priestess at Delphi added, however, that the Heraclids would have vengeance on a descendant of Gyges in the fifth generation. But to this prophecy both Lydians and their kings paid no attention—until it came to pass.

1.14 Thus the Mermnads came to possess the rule, taking it from the Heraclids, and as soon as Gyges became king he sent a large number of offerings to Delphi.

14 This fact was baffling to Greek men, much of whose sport and exercise was done in the nude.

15 687 BC. For differences in chronology between Herodotus's account and what modern historians reconstruct, see the table below.

**FIGURE 1.1 Wine crater**

Indeed of all the silver offerings in Delphi, the greater part are his; and apart from the silver he dedicated a great deal of gold too, among which particularly worth notice are the golden craters, six in number, that he set up there. These stand in the treasury of the Corinthians (though, to tell the truth, the treasury was not the gift of the Corinthian people but of Cypselus son of Eëtion), and have a weight of 30 talents.[16] This man Gyges was, to my knowledge, the first foreigner to set up offerings at Delphi—that is, the first after Midas son of Gordias, the king of Phrygia. Midas set up as an offering the royal throne where he sat to make judgment, a piece well worth seeing; and this throne lies in the same spot as the craters of Gyges. The gold and also the silver which Gyges dedicated is called "Gygian" by the Delphians, after its dedicator.

When he became king Gyges, like others before him, invaded the territory of Miletus and Smyrna, and occupied the lower town of Colophon. But no other great deed was worked by him in his reign of thirty-eight years. With 1.15
this then as his story we will let him go and turn to make note of the deeds of Ardys, son of Gyges, who took over the kingship after his father. This man seized Priene, and invaded the territory of Miletus; and it was during the time of his rule over Sardis that the Cimmerians, driven from their homeland by the nomadic Scythians, came to Asia and seized Sardis, all but the acropolis.

## Early Kings of Lydia: Ardys, Sadyattes, Alyattes and the War against Miletus

Ardys ruled for forty-nine years, and was succeeded by Sadyattes his son. 1.16
Sadyattes was king for twelve years, and after him came Alyattes. Alyattes

**TABLE 1.1: THE KINGS OF LYDIA**

| Name | Reign according to Herodotus | Reign according to modern historians |
|---|---|---|
| Gyges | 716–678 BC, 38 years | 687–652 BC |
| Ardys | 678–629 BC, 49 years | 652– ? BC |
| Sadyattes | 629–617 BC, 12 years | ? (c. 630–610 BC) |
| Alyattes | 617–560 BC, 57 years | ? (c. 610–560 BC) |
| Croesus | 560–546 BC, 14 years | 560–546 BC |

16 About 775 kg, 1700 pounds. A *treasury* was a small building in which were collected votive offerings from kings and cities. (See Figure 1.3.) Cypselus was the first tyrant of Corinth (7th century BC).


**MAP 1.3**

made war on the Medes and Cyaxares (a descendant of Deioces), drove the Cimmerians out of Asia, seized Smyrna (which was founded by the people of Colophon), and attacked Clazomenae. With these he did not fare as he hoped, but rather suffered a great defeat. As for the other deeds he performed during his rule here are the ones particularly worth narrating.

1.17 He fought with the Milesians—a war he inherited from his father. He marched on Miletus and besieged the city in a way worth describing. Just when the crops became full-grown he would invade with his army, marching in with pan flutes and wind harps and reed pipes soprano and alto in tone. And once they reached Milesian territory, they did not knock down the farm buildings, nor did they burn them or tear off the doors, but rather throughout the countryside left the buildings standing. But they did destroy the orchards and the crops in the field, and after that they went back home. The Milesians had control over the sea, you see, and so it was pointless to try to blockade them with his army. This then was the reason the Lydian king did not destroy the farm buildings: so that the Milesians would have farmsteads from which to set out to do the sowing and the work in the fields, and thus he would have something to attack and lay waste when the farm-work was done.[17]

1.18 In this manner Alyattes made war for eleven years, and during that time twice heavy blows were inflicted on the Milesians, one at the battle of Limeneium in their own territory and one in the valley of the Maeander. Six of these eleven years Sadyattes son of Ardys was the one ruling Lydia and attacking the Milesian territory with his army—and Sadyattes was also the one who started the war. For the last five years following these six it was then Alyattes, Sadyattes' son, who waged the war. So, Alyattes inherited the war from his father, as I have explained, but he pursued it with passion.

None of the Ionians, excepting only the men of Chios, came to the Milesians' relief in this war; and the Chians' help was by way of even return, since the Milesians had supported the Chians in their war against the Erythraeans.

1.19 Now in the twelfth year, as the crop was being burned by the army, an important thing happened. Just as the crop began to burn, the flames, blown by a strong gust of wind, set afire the temple of Athena of Assesus, and the temple burned to the ground. At the time, no one thought much about it, but afterward, when the army had arrived back in Sardis, Alyattes fell ill. The sickness

17 Greek readers will have been struck by the similarity of this strategy to the annual Spartan invasions of Attica (the area around Athens) in the Peloponnesian War. (Herodotus wrote his work during the run-up and start of that war: see Introduction.)

lasted longer than it should and so he sent a delegation to consult the oracle at Delphi—though it's unclear whether someone advised this or he himself thought to send to the god and ask about his sickness. When the emissaries arrived at Delphi the Pythian priestess declared that she would give no reply until they rebuilt the temple of Athena they had burned at Assesus in Miletus.

That's what I know from listening to the Delphians. The Milesians add to it this 1.20
detail. Periander the son of Cypselus was bound very closely by guest-friendship[18] to the man who was king of Miletus at that time, Thrasybulus. So, as soon as he learned the oracle's reply to Alyattes, he sent a messenger to tell Thrasybulus, allowing him to make plans in full knowledge of the situation that lay at hand.

That's what the Milesians say happened. In any case, Alyattes, when he 1.21
heard what the oracle had to say, immediately sent a herald to Miletus because he wanted to make a truce with Thrasybulus and the Milesians for whatever time it would take to rebuild the temple. So the herald went off to Miletus. Thrasybulus, however, knew all about the matter, and understood full well what Alyattes wanted to do; so he made a clever plan. He ordered brought to the public square all the grain in the city, public and private, and bade that at his signal everyone should drink and carouse with one another.

Thrasybulus arranged all this intending that the herald from Sardis see a 1.22
great mound of grain lying there and the people enjoying themselves, and report this back to Alyattes. And that is what happened. The herald saw exactly that, conveyed the king's appointed message to Thrasybulus, and returned to Sardis; and for this very reason, as my inquiries have confirmed, the desire for peace came about. Alyattes had expected that there would be a fierce grain shortage in Miletus, and that the people would be at their wit's end from distress and misery; yet the herald when he came home from Miletus reported the very opposite of what Alyattes had anticipated. Afterward, then, peace came about for these peoples, to the point that they became mutual guest-friends and allies. Alyattes built not one but two temples to Athena in Assesus; and he recovered from his illness. That then is the story of Alyattes' war with the Milesians and Thrasybulus.

## Periander at Corinth: Arion and the Dolphin

*A characteristic narrative move is the introduction of "digressions" such as the story here, which flows from the incidental mention of Periander and interrupts the narrative of the war against Miletus. The songs Arion performs are religious in nature and his performance in costume marks him as a pious figure singing in honor of the god. Some key motifs: the mutability of human fortune; divine rescue of the pious and retribution for the impious; corrupting allure of riches. Periander is an historical figure, ruler of the powerful Greek city of Corinth.*

18 Guest-friendship (*xenia*) was a formalized connection between powerful people, involving hospitality and help, and carrying forward over generations.

1.23


**MAP 1.4**

Now Periander son of Cypselus—the one who told Thrasybulus about the oracle—was the ruler of Corinth. The Corinthians say, and the Lesbians agree, that it was during his lifetime that a very great marvel occurred—when Arion of Methymna was carried to Cape Taenarum on the back of a dolphin. Arion was a citharode[19] second to none of that age, and he was, to my knowledge, the first man to compose and name the dithyrambic song,[20] and the first to train a choir to perform one, at Corinth.

1.24 The story goes that this man Arion, having spent most of his time at the court of Periander, had an urge to sail to Italy and Sicily. Once there he made a lot of money and then wanted to come home to Corinth. He trusted no one so much as the Corinthians, so he hired a ship of Corinthian men and set sail from Tarentum. But when they got on the open sea, the Corinthians hatched a plot to throw Arion overboard and take his money. Arion found out and beseeched them, offering them the money and begging for his life. The sailors would have none of it, though, ordering him either to kill himself, if he wanted to be buried on land, or to jump into the sea right then and there. Under threat and at a loss, Arion then begged them to let him stand on the quarterdeck in his robes and to sing; and he promised after singing to make an end of himself. The prospect of hearing the best singer in the world was a pleasant one to the sailors, and so they withdrew from the stern to the middle of the ship. Arion

**FIGURE 1.2 Citharode**

19 A citharode (see Figure 1.2) sang while accompanying himself with a large lyre (the *cithara*) meant for performance to large audiences. Successful singers were the rock stars of the era, able to fill entire theaters and thereby make great sums of money.

20 The innovation claimed here was that he trained choruses to sing and dance to songs that included a mythic story in addition to the music and dance; this particular type of formal song was known as the *dithyramb*, and is credited by Aristotle as being the first step toward what will become Greek tragedy.

put on all his robes, took up the cithara, and standing on the deck he sang the Orthian Song[21] all the way through; then, when the song was over, he threw himself into the sea, just as he was, with all his robes. The crew sailed away to Corinth, but—the story goes—a dolphin took Arion on his back and carried him to Cape Taenarum. Once he reached land, Arion went to Corinth, still in his singing robes. On his arrival he described everything that had happened, and Periander, not believing him, held Arion under guard at the palace, while keeping an eye out for the sailors. And when the sailors arrived, he summoned them, asking what news they had of Arion. The sailors said that he was safe and sound in Italy and that they had left him doing well in Tarentum. But no sooner had they spoken than Arion presented himself, dressed just as he was when he jumped off the ship. Stunned and confused, the sailors confessed, no longer able to deny what was manifestly proved against them. That's the story the Corinthians and Lesbians tell, and there is in fact a statue of Arion, a small bronze one, at Cape Taenarum—the figure of a man riding upon a dolphin.

1.25 Alyattes—the Lydian who had waged war against the Milesians—then died, after a reign of fifty-seven years. In thanks for his delivery from disease he became the second of this dynasty to set up an offering at Delphi: a huge crater of silver and a crater-stand welded of iron. This crater-stand is truly worth seeing, even among all the offerings at Delphi, since it is the work of Glaucus of Chios, the only man ever to discover how to weld iron together.

## Croesus and Solon

*Solon stands in as representative of archaic Greek wisdom. Solon was a famous man, one of the "founding fathers" for what would become democratic Athens; he is said to have died in c. 559 BC, and if that is right then the meeting here described is entirely legendary. Note the strongly schematic oppositions in play: between Eastern arrogance (hubris) and Greek wisdom; excess and moderation; selfish materialism and selfless piety (to family and the state as well as the gods). Some other key motifs: the figure of the wise advisor (twice: once heeded, once ignored); the hubristic claim of the ruler ("the most prosperous"); the uncontrolled urge to imperial expansion; the mutability of human fortune.*

1.26 On the death of Alyattes, his son Croesus succeeded to the kingship, at the age of thirty-five years. The first of the Greeks he attacked were the Ephesians. The Ephesians, surrounded and under siege, tied a rope from the old city wall to the temple of Artemis, thereby putting the city under the goddess's protection—a distance of seven stades.[22] The Ephesians were the first he attacked; but he attacked in turn each of the Ionians and Aeolians, on one pretext or another, laying on a grave accusation where he could find it, and petty excuses for the rest.

21 A traditional high-pitched hymn sung in honor of the god Apollo.

22 A long distance, about 3/4 of a mile, 1200 meters. The strategy is to make the entire city sacrosanct by using a physical link from the sacred temple to the city wall; by implication, Croesus does not respect the sanctity thereby conferred and conquers the city anyway.

1.27 Once he had subjected the Greeks on mainland Asia to the paying of tribute,[23] Croesus then formed a plan to build ships and attack the Greek islands. When he had everything ready for the construction of the ships, Bias of Priene came to Sardis, as some tell the tale, or as others tell it, Pittacus of Mytilene,[24] and in reply to Croesus's inquiry about what news there was from Greece, said (and so stopped the ship building), "King, the islanders are buying up thousands of horses, intending to march on you and Sardis." Croesus, taking the remark seriously, said, "Ah, ye gods, I pray you make this come to pass, that the islanders meet the sons of the Lydians on horseback!"[25] The Greek then replied, "King, you eagerly pray to catch the islanders on horseback and on land, and no doubt with justice. But what do you think the islanders pray for? As soon as they heard that you were going to build ships to attack them, don't you think they prayed to catch the Lydians on the sea? There, they can expect to take vengeance on you for the Greeks of the mainland, whom you made your slaves and now hold as such." Croesus was delighted at the moral of the story—he thought the Greek spoke shrewdly—and so he decided to leave off the building of the ships. That then is how he came to make an alliance of guest-friendship with the Ionians who lived on the islands.

1.28 Over time, almost all of the peoples in Asia who live on this side of the river Halys were under his sway. The Cilicians and the Lycians proved exceptions, but Croesus made everyone else his subjects: the Lydians, Phrygians, Mysians, Mariandynians, Chalybians, Paphlagonians, Thracians both Thynian and Bithynian, Carians, Ionians, Dorians, Aeolians, Pamphylians.

1.29 So, then, did Croesus subdue all these peoples and make them part of the Lydian empire. To Sardis, now at its height of prosperity, came all the Greek wise men of the time, one by one. And among these was Solon, an Athenian man. Solon had been asked by the Athenians to set up written laws and then had gone abroad for ten years—claiming to be off on a world tour, but in fact so as not to be forced to repeal any of the laws he had made. (The Athenians couldn't make changes themselves, you understand, since they were constrained by mighty oaths to use for ten years whatever laws Solon set in place.)

1.30 For this reason, then—but to see the world too—Solon had gone abroad, paying a visit to the court of Amasis in Egypt and also, now, to the court of Croesus in Sardis. On his arrival, Croesus received him hospitably and entertained him as a guest in the palace. Later, on the third or fourth day, Croesus had his servants take Solon around the treasure rooms and show him the magnitude of his prosperity. Solon gazed upon it all and examined it carefully.

23 Paying money as annual tribute to the king marks these Greeks as no longer free, in Greek terms effectively the "slaves" of the Lydian king. Herodotus's readers might also think here of the contemporary Athenian Empire, by which democratic Athens subjected many Greek states to the paying of tribute.

24 Bias of Priene and Pittacus of Mytilene are usually included in lists of the canonical Seven Sages of Greece.

25 The Lydians were famous for their exceptionally well-trained and effective cavalry, whereas the inhabitants of the small Greek islands would have had little opportunity to develop this skill. Conversely, the islanders were famed for their skills in fighting at sea.

When the moment seemed right, Croesus asked, "Athenian friend, many a report has come to our court about you, your wisdom and your travels, how for love of knowledge and to see the world you have traversed many a land. So now, I cannot resist asking whether there is one who is the most prosperous of all you have seen?"[26]

Croesus put the question fully convinced that he himself was the one, but Solon, uninterested in flattery, spoke out the truth: "King, yes I have—Tellus the Athenian." Croesus was taken aback. "And why," he asked sharply, "do you judge *Tellus* the most prosperous?" Solon said, "Tellus had sons in a time when the city was doing well, beautiful, refined sons, and he lived to see from each of them grandchildren, and the grandchildren survived and flourished; moreover, he had wealth, at least by our standards, and in this prosperity he ended his life in most glorious fashion—for at a time of war for Athens he came to the aid of his fellow citizens in Eleusis, put the enemy to flight, and died with great bravery, for which the Athenians gave him a public burial on the very spot where he fell, and honored him greatly."

1.31 Solon's account of the great prosperity surrounding Tellus goaded Croesus, and so he asked who was the next most prosperous man he had seen, thinking to carry off second prize at least. But Solon said: "Cleobis and Biton. These two, Argive in race, had livelihood enough, and in addition had remarkable bodily strength. They were both prize athletes, and the story is told that once, when the Argives were celebrating a festival for the goddess Hera, it was critical that their mother be brought to the temple by cart—but the oxen were not back from the field at the appointed hour. Want of time prevented them from doing anything else, and so the young men put on the yoke and dragged the cart themselves. The mother rode in the cart, traveling a distance of forty-five stades,[27] and thus arrived at the temple. This they accomplished, in full view of the entire crowd, and then enjoyed the best possible end of life—and the god made clear thereby that it was better for a man to die than to live. You see, the Argive men standing round were congratulating the young men on their strength, and the Argive women were congratulating the mother for the fine sons she had. The mother, greatly overjoyed with what her sons had done and what the crowd had said, stood opposite the cult statue and prayed for the goddess to give to Cleobis and Biton, who had honored her greatly, the best thing that mortal man can receive. Following this prayer, they sacrificed and feasted, and the youths lay down to sleep on the temple floor. And they never stood again—caught by life's end. The Argives made statues of the youths, since they had proved to be outstanding men, and set these up as offerings at Delphi."

26 The Greek word here, *olbios*, sometimes translated as *happy*, means blessed with good fortune, but can also mean rich in material goods. The entire passage is suffused with a fundamental ambiguity as to whether human happiness or material wealth is the subject; both devolve from divine favor.

27 About 5 miles, 8 km. This is a remarkable feat: ox carts were crude and heavy, and roads were primitive.

1.32 So Solon gave out the second prize for good fortune[28] to these two, and Croesus, seething, said, "Athenian friend, do you so disdain my good fortune that you rank me below mere private citizens?"

"Croesus," said Solon, "you ask me about human affairs, but I know only that the divine is always begrudging and baffling. Over a length of time there are many sights that no one wants to see, and many ills to suffer. I reckon the limit of a man's life at seventy years. These seventy years add up to twenty-five thousand and two hundred days, not counting the intercalary months;[29] and, if every second year you add a month to align seasons and calendar, there will be thirty-five intercalary months over the seventy years, and those months add up to one thousand and fifty days. The sum total of days over the course of seventy years is, then, twenty-six thousand two hundred and fifty, and of these not one day among them ever brings the same experience as another day. So you see, Croesus: for mankind all of life is but chance—what each day happens to bring.

"You appear to me to be very rich, and a king over many men; but that which you ask me, I cannot yet say, not until I hear that you have come nobly to the end of your lifetime. For the rich man is in no way more prosperous than the man who has only enough for a day, unless the good fortune follow that he who has many fine things also ends his life well. Many very rich people are without true prosperity, and many of those with modest livelihood have great fortune. The man who is very rich but not really prosperous has advantage over the fortunate man in only two ways, but the fortunate man has advantage in many. The rich man is more able to fulfill his desire and also to bear a great and ruinous fall, and in these things he holds the advantage; whereas the fortunate man has not the same capability for a ruinous fall nor for fulfilling desire, but his good fortune keeps these at bay, and he is sound of limb, without illness, without experience of evil, with good children and good looks. If in addition to all that he ends his life well, here then is the man you seek, here is the one worthy of the name "prosperous." But before he dies, you must hold back: do not yet name him "prosperous" or "blessed" but only a man of good fortune.

"No mortal man is able to have everything, just as no country is able to provide everything for itself, but has one thing and lacks another; and that country which has the most, is the best. Similarly the body of a man is not at all self-sufficient, but has one thing and lacks another; and he who continues to hold onto the most, and then ends his life in blessed fashion, this man, King, is in my view the one who justly carries the title. One has to look to the

28 The terms change here, from *olbios* ("happy, rich") to *eudaimonië*, which is the usual Greek word for "happiness" but also refers to being blessed, literally "favored by the gods."

29 The calculation is simplified, as if there were 360 days in a year. In fact the calendar year was based on 12 months of 29–30 days, totaling 354 days a year. To bring the solar and calendar years into (approximate) alignment, the Greeks had to adjust by adding an extra month (the intercalary month) every other year. In this calculation, Solon displays his firm control over matters of science and mathematics, one aspect of his wise man persona.

end of everything, how it turns out: the god who gives many a glimpse of the heights of prosperity is also the god who overturns them by the roots."

So spoke Solon. Croesus was not at all pleased, nor was he impressed; and 1.33
so he sent him away, thinking the man surely a simpleton, who dismisses all the good that lies to hand and urges to look to the end of everything.

## Atys and Adrastus

*This tale, another legend attached to the figure of Croesus, explores further the mutability of human fortune, this time with an emphasis on the sort of irony we associate with Greek tragedy: the one who thinks to see the dream's meaning is blind to the god's intention; the protector unwittingly becomes the killer; the effort to thwart what is fated leads to fate's fulfillment. Motifs include then the limits of mortal understanding; the inescapability of fate; the ambiguity of divine messages. How the arrogance of Croesus exposed in the Solon episode relates to the tragic events here would have been clear to a Greek: to think oneself the best is to display hubris, since it shows a lack of awareness of mortal limitations; and the divine reaction to hubris is nemesis, the retribution that brings an arrogant man to ruin.*

After Solon was gone, a mighty retribution (*nemesis*) from the god came to 1.34
lay hold of Croesus—in all probability because he considered himself the most prosperous of all men. That very night a dream stood over Croesus in his sleep, and declared unerringly the evils that were to come to pass for his son. Croesus had two children, one of whom was crippled—he was deaf and mute—and the other far the first of those his age in every way. That one's name was Atys. The dream was about this Atys, and it revealed to Croesus that he was going to die from the blow of an iron spear. When Croesus awoke he thought it over, and he was frightened by the dream. So he brought in a bride for his son; he stopped sending him on military expeditions altogether, even though Atys had often been in command; and, gathering up from the men's quarters the spears and javelins and all such instruments of war, he heaped them up in the storerooms, to be sure that a spear hanging on the wall didn't chance to fall on his son.

Croesus was busy with his son's wedding when there came to Sardis a man 1.35
gripped by misfortune, with blood on his hands, a Phrygian by birth and of royal ancestry. This man came to the palace of Croesus asking for ritual purification, as was the custom of that place, and Croesus purified him—the purification ritual for the Lydians is similar to that of the Greeks. Once he had performed the customary rites, Croesus asked where the man came from and who he was, saying, "Who are you and what part of Phrygia do you come from, to sit here by the fireside?[30] And what man or woman did you slay?" The man replied, "King, I am the son of Gordias son of Midas, and my name is

30 This echoes a recurrent line in Homer's *Odyssey*, "Who are you? Who are your parents? Where do you come from?" and thus gives the scene an epic atmosphere. The warning dream is likewise a motif taken from Homer.

Adrastus.[31] Against my will I killed my own brother, and I am here now being driven from the land by my father, stripped of all material possessions." "You are the offspring of men who are my guest-friends," answered Croesus, "and so you have come to friends. You will stay here in my palace, and you will lack nothing in material goods. As for this misfortune of yours, bear it as lightly as you can: that will do you the most good."

1.36 And so Adrastus came to live at the court of Croesus. In this same time there appeared on Mount Olympus in Mysia a great and monstrous boar. Hurtling down from the mountain the boar would ravage the crops of the Mysians. Time and again the Mysians would go out to fight the boar but do him no harm while being hurt themselves. At last, then, messengers from the Mysians came to the court of Croesus and said, "King, a great and monstrous boar has appeared in our land, and he is devastating our crops. We have done our best to kill him, but without success. We therefore make this request: send us your son and your pick of young men and dogs, so that we can drive the boar from our land." That then was their request. But Croesus, mindful of the dream, said, "Say nothing further about my son—I cannot send him along, as he is newly married and that is at the moment his main concern; but I will send my pick of the young men and the whole of my pack of hunting dogs, and I will command these to try their best to drive this wild beast from your land."

1.37 So Croesus replied, and the Mysians were satisfied. But just then Croesus's son came in, having heard of the Mysians' request. And when Croesus refused to send the son along with them, the young man said, "Father, before now, gaining distinction by going to wars and to hunts was all that was fine and noble. These days you keep me barred from both, though surely you haven't seen in me either cowardice or faintness of heart. What face am I to put on as I go to and from the central square? What sort of man will people take me for? And what of my newly wedded wife—what kind of man will she think she's living with? Either let me go to this hunt, or tell me some compelling reason why doing it this way is better."

1.38 Croesus then replied, "Son, I am doing it this way not because I have noticed cowardice or anything else ignoble in you; rather, a dream vision stood over me in my sleep and told me that you would be short-lived, that you would die from an iron spear. It was in reaction to this dream that I hurried along your marriage and do not send you along on the present expedition; I was being protective, looking for how I might steal you from fate, for my lifetime at least. For you are really my only child—that other one, the cripple who cannot hear, I don't consider my own."

1.39 The young man replied, "It's understandable that, after you saw such a vision, you were protective of me. But it's only right for me to point out what

31 In Greek Adrastus means "unable to escape/be escaped," and that will dovetail with the ironic conclusion to the story. (*Adrasteia* is also a name for *Nemesis*, inescapable divine Retribution.) Atys is a real Lydian name, but to a Greek sounds like the word for "Ruin" (*atē*).

you don't understand about the dream, what it has made you forget: you say that the dream said that I will die from an iron spear. But what sort of boar has hands, and thus what sort of iron spear are you afraid of? If it said that I would die by a tusk, or anything else appropriate to a boar, then you certainly ought to be doing exactly what you're doing. But as it is the dream said 'from an iron spear.' Therefore, seeing that the fight here is not against men, let me go."

1.40 Croesus replied, "Son, your view of the dream does in a way outdo mine, and so you win. I change my mind: you are allowed to go to the hunt."

1.41 So spoke Croesus. He then sent for the Phrygian Adrastus, and when he arrived said to him, "Adrastus, I performed the rites of purification for you when you were struck by a nasty misfortune—for which I do not reproach you—and I have welcomed you into my house, covering your every expense. Now—since you owe me a kindness in return for the kindness I rendered you—I need you to be my son's bodyguard as he sets forth to the hunt, to keep away the danger of thieves and criminals along the road. In addition to all that, it is but right that you too go where you can prove your valor and excellence: this is in your ancestry, and, besides, you are strong and able."

1.42 "King," replied Adrastus, "I would not otherwise go to this contest: someone with fortune as bad as mine ought not to be with those of his age who are prospering, nor even to want to be, and for that and other reasons I would hold myself back. But as it is, since you urge it and I want to please you—for I do owe you a kindness in return—yes, I consent to do this, and you may expect that your son, whom you ask me to guard, will return home free from harm, as least so far as that lies in the power of the one guarding him."

1.43 So Adrastus replied. He then went along, equipped with his pick of young men and dogs, and when they got to Mount Olympus they looked for the beast and found it. The men were standing about in a circle hurling their spears at the monstrous boar. Then the stranger and guest-friend, this man who had been cleansed of murder, the one called Adrastus, hurled his spear at the boar, and he missed; but he hit—the son of Croesus. And so the son died, struck by the blow of an iron spear, and the dream's prophecy was fulfilled. Someone then rushed to tell Croesus what had happened; arriving at Sardis, he described to Croesus the fight with the boar and the fate of his child.

1.44 Croesus was distraught at the death of his child, and all the more bitter since the killer was the very one he himself had made pure. In grief and anger at this turn of fortune, with terrible cries he called upon Zeus the Purifier as witness of what he had suffered at the hands of his guest; and named also Zeus, Protector of the Hearth and Zeus Guardian of Friendship, the former because he had welcomed into his home and fed the stranger, unaware that he was to be the murderer of his son, and the latter because the one sent as a defender had turned out to be the worst of enemies.

1.45 Later, the Lydian men came along, carrying the corpse, with the killer following along behind. Setting himself before the corpse, he offered himself to Croesus, stretching forth his hands, telling him to slay him upon the corpse.

He spoke of his earlier misfortune; and since he had also destroyed the very one who purified him, his life was not worth living. As Croesus listened, even in his own great personal misery he took pity on Adrastus, and he said to him, "Stranger and guest-friend, I have all the justice I need of you, since you condemn yourself to death. You are not to blame for this disaster, or only in the sense that you did something unwittingly; no, it is some god, I suppose, and he signaled to me long ago what was going to happen." And so Croesus buried his son in fitting manner, and once the area near the gravestone was clear of people, Adrastus son of Gordias son of Midas, the killer of his own brother and killer of the one who cleansed him, recognizing that he was the most ill-fortuned of all he had known, stabbed himself and fell upon the tomb.

## Croesus Tests the Oracles

*Oracles in Greece had deep influence on human affairs. The oracle of Apollo at Delphi, in particular, acted as an instrument to resolve serious political and diplomatic problems, even wars, as we will see. At Delphi, the oracle was delivered by the Pythian priestess, who in response to a request would become possessed by the god and (in literary accounts, at any rate) would speak out the god's reply in perfect hexameter verses. Some key motifs: mortal arrogance toward the divine ("testing" the oracles); the ambiguity in divine messages. The lengthy catalogue of Croesus's sacrifices and gifts exemplifies the theme of eastern luxury and material excess.*

1.46 For two years Croesus sat about mourning deeply for the loss of his child. But then it came to pass that the dynasty of Astyages son of Cyaxares was overthrown by Cyrus son of Cambyses and the power of the Persians was growing; whereupon Croesus left off his grief, and began instead to ponder how he could hold back the Persians before they became truly great. With that as his aim, he quickly fashioned a test for the oracles of the Greeks and the one in Libya too: among the Greek oracles, he sent messengers to make consultation at Delphi, at Abae in Phocis, and at Dodona; at the shrines of Amphiaraus and of Trophonius; at Branchidae in Miletus; and as for Libya, he sent yet others to consult the oracle at Ammon. And this is why he sent these messengers to test the oracles: he had in mind that if he found an oracle that had true knowledge, he would then consult it a second time, and ask whether he should make war upon the Persians.


**MAP 1.5**

1.47 To test the oracles, he sent off messengers with this set of instructions: reckoning from the day they set out from Sardis, on the hundredth day forward they were to consult the

oracles, asking what exactly Croesus son of Alyattes and king of the Lydians was doing; and they were to write down whatever divine utterance each oracle delivered and bring that back to him. No one now is able to say what the rest of the oracles responded; but at Delphi, as soon as the Lydians came to the temple to consult the god and asked what they had been instructed to ask, the Pythian priestess said in hexameter verse: *I know the number of the grains of sand and the measure of the sea; / I understand the mute and hear the one who does not speak. / A smell comes to my senses, of a tortoise hard of shell, / boiled in bronze with the flesh of lamb: / bronze laid underneath, and bronze set on top.*

1.48 Such were the prophetic verses of the Pythian priestess, and so the Lydian messengers wrote them down and went on their way, back to Sardis. Now as the other messengers brought back the oracular responses and appeared before him, Croesus unrolled each scroll and looked upon what was written, and not one of them pleased him; but when he heard what had come from Delphi, at once he offered prayers and praises. The oracle at Delphi he considered the one true oracle, since it alone had revealed what he had done. For, after he had sent the sacred messengers off to the oracles, Croesus watched for the day appointed and devised something that would be impossible to puzzle out or imagine: with his own hands he cut up a tortoise and a lamb and boiled them in a bronze cauldron with a bronze lid set upon it.

1.49 That then was the Delphic oracle's response to Croesus. As to the reply of the oracle of Amphiaraus at Oropus, no report survives and so I am not able to say what the oracle replied once the Lydians had performed the customary rites at the temple; but I can say that he considered this oracle also to possess unerring truth.

1.50 After all this, he worked to gain the Delphic god's favor[32] with great sacrifices: he slaughtered every kind of domestic beast as sacrificial victims, three thousand in count; he heaped up couches overlaid with gold and silver, and golden chalices, and purple robes and gowns, and burned them in a great sacrificial fire. And he gave commands to the Lydians, that everyone sacrifice everything they could to the god. After he was done with the sacrifices, he melted down heaps of gold, beyond measure, and had it beaten into ingots, making each six palms in length, three palms in width, and one palm high.[33] There were one hundred and seventeen of them: four of refined gold, weighing two and a half talents each, and the rest ingots of gold alloyed with silver, two talents each in weight.[34] He also had a statue of a lion made, of refined gold, weighing ten talents. This lion, when the temple at Delphi burned down, fell off the ingots (whereupon it stood), and now is set up in the Corinthian Treasury; it now weighs six and a half talents, for three and a half talents melted away in the fire.

32 Apollo.

33 Each palm is about 3 inches (7.5 cm).

34 Each talent is about 57 pounds (26 kg).

1.51

**FIGURE 1.3 Delphic treasury building (pictured here is the Athenian treasury)**

Once the ingots and the statue were finished, Croesus dispatched them to Delphi and other things too: two wine craters (Figure 1.1), large ones of gold and of silver; the golden crater was set up on the right of the temple's entryway, and the silver crater to the left. These too had to be moved when the temple burned down: now the golden one is set up in the Treasury of the Clazomenians, weighing eight and a half talents plus twelve minas,[35] and the silver one stands in a niche in the front hall of the temple, with a capacity of six hundred amphoras[36]—the Delphians use it to this day as the mixing bowl for wine when they celebrate the feast day called Theophania. The Delphians claim that the craters are the work of Theodorus of Samos, and I think so too: the workmanship is not that of just anyone, or so it looks to me.

Croesus dispatched also four large silver casks, which have been set up in the Corinthian Treasury; and he also made an offering of two lustral basins, one gold, one silver. The gold one has an engraving that claims it as an offering of the Spartans, but that is not correct: this vessel also is from Croesus. A Delphian man who wanted to curry favor with the Spartans made that engraving; his name I know but I will not record it. There is, however, a statue of a boy with water running through his fingers, and that is a gift of the Spartans—but not the water vessels themselves.

1.52

**FIGURE 1.4 Perirrhanterion, a basin for holy water, used to purify those entering a temple**

Croesus dispatched many other things too that did not have his name inscribed, including perfectly circular cast silver bowls, and a golden statue, over four feet high, of a woman (which the Delphians say is an image of Croesus's baker). And, finally, Croesus dedicated his wife's necklaces and the sashes from her waist.

Such were his dispatches to Delphi. To the oracle at Amphiaraus, once he had learned of the hero's valor and ill fate,[37] he

35 A mina is 1/60 of a talent, thus about 1 pound or 1/2 kg.

36 An amphora is a large jug that contains about 10 gallons (40 liters). The capacity of this crater—6000 gallons, 24,000 liters—seems to many commentators fantastically large.

37 In Greek myth, the hero Amphiaraus fought as one of the "Seven against Thebes" and was swallowed up by a sudden chasm in the earth. His tomb was the site of the oracle associated with him.

dedicated a shield of solid gold and a spear also all of gold, the shaft as golden as the spearhead. In my time these were both still lying in Thebes, in the Theban temple of Ismenian Apollo.

1.53 When the Lydians were ready to take the gifts to the two oracles, Croesus gave instructions to ask the oracles if he, Croesus, should make war upon the Persians, and if he should make an alliance with some other power. When they arrived at their destinations, the Lydians made their offering, and then made inquiry of the oracles with these words: "Croesus, king of the Lydians and other peoples, inasmuch as he considers you alone the true oracles among mortal men, has made offerings befitting your powers of divination. So now it is you he asks, if he should make war upon the Persians, and if he should add some other power as an ally to fight alongside him." Such was their inquiry; and both oracles came to the same judgment, making this prophecy for Croesus, that *if he should make war upon the Persians, he would destroy a great kingdom*; and they also advised him to investigate which among the Greek states were the most powerful and to make those his allies.

1.54 When Croesus heard the report of the divine prophesies, he was very pleased with the oracles, having now every expectation that he would destroy the kingdom of Cyrus. So he sent again to the Pythian priestess and—having found out how many Delphians there were—he gave two gold coins to each man in Delphi. In return, the Delphians gave Croesus and the Lydians the right to consult the oracle first, exemption from all fees, and the honor of front-row seats at the games; and furthermore set up that for all time any Lydian who wanted to could become a citizen of Delphi.

1.55 Once he had bestowed the coins on the Delphians, Croesus consulted the oracle a third time—having found revelation of truth in the oracle before, he was hungry for more. And so he inquired of the oracle as to whether his monarchy would last a long time. The Pythian priestess responded with these verses: *At which time a mule becomes king of the Medes, / then, tender-footed Lydian, beside the river Hermus of many pebbles / you must flee: do not stand your ground, and be not ashamed of cowardice.*

1.56 Of all the prophecies he had heard from the oracle, Croesus found this by far the most pleasing. He now had every expectation that he and his descendants would rule without end—surely, he thought, the Medes could never have as their king a mule instead of a man.

## Croesus Seeks an Ally

*Just at the moment when the narrator seems ready to depict the Lydian attack on the Persians—the ultimate focal point for the story of Croesus—there is a long pause while the narrator sketches out the early history of Athens and Sparta. This retardation of the narrative's forward movement (a technique Herodotus takes from Homer) is important, since it substantially alters the reader's perspective. The focus on Delphi and now Athens and Sparta re-centers the narrative on Greece,*

*highlights the two Greek city-states that will come to predominate, and rewrites eastern events as events that include the west, even though in fact the alliance with Sparta will have no actual impact on the Lydian-Persian conflict.*

Croesus next turned his thoughts to investigating which among the Greek states was the most powerful, so that he could make those his allies. And on inquiry, he found that the Spartans and Athenians were preeminent. . . .

## Background: Athens

*We feel a slight shift in what follows to a voice that relies less on folkloristic storytelling and more on presentation and evaluation of "historical" sources, probably a reflection of the move from eastern kingship stories to the oral traditions of Greek family clans. That does not however preclude the insertion of what we now see as typical motifs, such as the wise advisor (here ignored), the opposition of Greek cleverness and of eastern credulity (here interestingly complicated), the duplicity of tyrants, the influence of oracles. Also introduced is the important question of what makes for a well-ordered state, and the relation of that to the fundamental opposition between tyranny and freedom.*

1.59 Of the two Greek powers, Croesus learned that in Athens the entire surrounding territory of Attica had been torn apart and held down by Peisistratus, son of Hippocrates, who by that time had become tyrant of the city. His father Hippocrates was but a private citizen when, as a spectator at the Olympian games, he met with a great omen. He had just finished making his sacrifice, when the cauldrons, standing there full of meat and water but not yet on the fire, started to simmer and boiled over. A Spartan, Chilon,[38] saw the omen—he happened to be standing right there—and gave Hippocrates this advice: "Best would be never to bring a childbearing wife into your house; but, if you have one already, send her away at least; and if you already have a child, disown it." Such was Chilon's advice, but Hippocrates was not inclined to listen. And so it came to pass that there was born to him a son, Peisistratus.

In course of time fighting had broken out between two of the Athenian factions[39]—the Shore Party under Megacles son of Alcmaeon and the Plain Party under Lycurgus son of Aristoleides—and Peisistratus already then harbored thoughts of tyranny. So, he put together a third faction, pretending to be the leader of those from the hill-country, and then carried out his plan.

First Peisistratus stabbed himself and his mules—to wound not to kill—and then he drove his mule-team to the central market of Athens, pretending that he was running away from foes who (he claimed) had tried to kill him as

38 Often included in the list of the "Seven Sages" of antiquity (along with Solon, Bias, Pittacus, Thales, and others).

39 The factions were defined territorially, since the terrain led to different ways of life with different political interests: 1. Shore Party = traders and fishermen, 2. Plain party = landowners of large farms, 3. Hill Party = herdsmen and farmers who worked smaller plots in the hill-country. Political reality was, of course, more complicated, but Herodotus here uses the terminology current in his day.

he was driving out of town. He asked the people to grant him a bodyguard—he who had already distinguished himself as their general in the campaign against the Megarians, capturing Nisaea and working other great deeds as well.

The people of Athens were completely taken in, and so they granted him a chosen force of three hundred citizens—who did not, however, serve as Peisistratus's spearmen,[40] but as his clubmen, for they accompanied him wielding wooden clubs. These men then joined cause with Peisistratus, rose up, and took possession of the acropolis. In such a way did Peisistratus take over as ruler of Athens,[41] but he neither meddled with existing magistracies nor did he change the laws. Rather, he governed the city in accordance with the law as constituted, arranging state affairs properly and well. After not much time 1.60
had passed, however, the factions of Megacles and Lycurgus made a truce and combined forces to depose him and send him into exile. That, then, is how Peisistratus first came to rule Athens, and yet lost the rule before his tyranny was firmly rooted.

As soon as the two factions had driven Peisistratus from power, they began once again to fight with one another. Megacles was getting the worse of these factional struggles, and so he sent a messenger to Peisistratus, to inquire if he would be willing to take Megacles' daughter as wife in return for the tyranny. Peisistratus accepted the offer on the terms prescribed. The two then devised a plan for his return that I find the silliest imaginable—especially inasmuch as from of old the Greeks supposedly were distinguished from barbarian peoples in being more savvy and many removes from credulity and naïveté, and yet at that time these men perpetrated a scheme as silly as this on Athenians, who are said to be foremost among Greeks for their intelligence.

**FIGURE 1.5 Athena in panoply**

Here was the plan. In the Attic village of Paeania, there was a woman named Phya, who was

40 This alludes to tyrants in general and in particular the Persian king, who, as we will see, goes about with a large bodyguard of spearmen.

41 561/560 BC.


**MAP 1.6**

almost six feet tall and very good looking as well. They fitted out this woman with a panoply of armor, put her onto a chariot, and showed her how to carry herself so as to present a striking figure; and then they drove the chariot to Athens, sending in advance heralds who, as soon as they reached the city, made proclamation as they had been instructed, saying, "Men of Athens, receive Peisistratus with kindly heart, he whom Athena, honoring him above all men, escorts to her own acropolis herself."[42] So proclaiming, the heralds roamed the city far and wide. Immediately the rumor spread throughout Attica that Athena was acting as escort to Peisistratus, and those in the city, believing the woman to be a goddess, prayed to this mere mortal, and received Peisistratus back.

1.61 In this way Peisistratus took back the tyranny[43] and, as they had agreed, he wedded Megacles' daughter. But Peisistratus already had young children, and

42 The Athenian Acropolis, whose Parthenon was Athena's temple. (Athens is named for its guardian goddess, Athena.)
43 c. 557 BC.

Megacles' clan, the Alcmaeonids, was said to be under a curse; he therefore did not want to have children with his new wife. So he had sex with her, but not in the way that custom dictates. At first, the wife kept the matter secret, but after a while—I don't know whether in answer to a question—she told her mother, and her mother told her father. Megacles thought this a horrific disgrace Peisistratus had brought upon him, and so, in his anger, he now let go his disagreements with the opposition.

When Peisistratus learned of the plot forming against him, he left Attica altogether, going to Eretria, where he gathered his sons to take counsel. The advice of his son Hippias won the day: to retake the tyranny. So they tried to collect money from all the cities that had any sort of obligation to them. Many gave a great deal of money, and the Thebans the most of all. I will not make a long story of it: time passed and eventually all the preparations were made for Peisistratus's return. Argive mercenaries had come from the Peloponnese, and an enthusiastic volunteer named Lygdamis had arrived from Naxos, bringing both money and fighters. Finally, in the eleventh year, they set forth 1.62
from Eretria and returned to Athens.

Once in Attica, they occupied Marathon first. There, as they were encamped, their partisans from the city came to join them; and others poured in from the villages—those for whom tyranny was more welcome than freedom. And so their numbers swelled. The Athenians in the city had paid Peisistratus little attention while he was collecting money and even after he occupied Marathon. But when they learned that he was marching from Marathon against the city, they lent their support in the fight against him, coming out in full force to oppose the returning exiles. Peisistratus's men meanwhile marched from Marathon to attack the city. The forces met as they came to the temple of Athena in Pallene; there, they took up positions opposite one another. At that moment, by guidance of the goddess, the seer Amphilytus of Acarnania came to stand alongside Peisistratus, and spoke these verses: *the cast has been made, the net is spread out, / and the tuna will come, darting along the shoals through the moonstruck night.*

Possessed by the goddess, Amphilytus spoke forth this oracle, but it was 1.63
Peisistratus who grasped its meaning. Saying that he was following the prophecy, he led his army to the attack. Now at that time the Athenians who had come down from the city had turned to lunch; after lunch quite a few were playing dice, while others were taking a nap. Peisistratus's army swooped upon the Athenians and routed them.

With the Athenians in flight, Peisistratus next devised an exceptionally smart strategy, so that the Athenians would not regroup but would remain scattered. He mounted his sons on horseback and sent them forth; as they overtook the fleeing Athenians, the sons told them what Peisistratus had ordered, that they need not worry for retribution if each went back to his own house. The Athenians did as they were told. 1.64

So, Peisistratus came to rule Athens a third time[44] and this time he made the tyranny take root, albeit with mercenaries and a great influx of money—some from Athens and the rest from Thrace. Some of the Athenians had not yielded and refused to flee, and from these he took their children as hostages and sent them to live in Naxos (which he had defeated in a war and handed over to Lygdamis). In addition, following the advice of an oracle, he purified Delos, working it like this: as far as one could see from the sacred precinct on Delos, he had the graves dug and the corpses relocated to another part of the island.

Thus did Peisistratus set up his tyranny at Athens, with some Athenians killed in battle, and others—including those of the Alcmaeonid clan—exiled from their homeland.

## Background: Sparta

*By Herodotus's time, the Spartan state consisted of the Spartans proper, called the Spartiates, and inferiors who sustained them. The Spartiates lived in extraordinary circumstances (soldierly brotherhoods, in effect) that demanded fierce concentration on physical virtue, and led to their famous excellence in warfare. The well-ordered government apparatus that supported this military state was much admired in antiquity. Tegea was the last region to fall in Sparta's gradual assertion of control over much of the Peloponnese (the entire south of Greece). Some key motifs: ambiguity of the divine message (one riddle they get right, the other wrong); the important influence of the Delphic oracle in warfare and diplomacy; the researcher's duty to consider carefully conflicting sources.*

1.65 Such were the conditions in Athens at this time, as Croesus learned, but of the Spartans, he learned that they had just put behind them great troubles and had recently achieved victory in their struggle with Tegea. In the time of the kingship of Leon and Hegesicles,[45] the Spartans had come to be consistently victorious over their enemies, faltering only against the Tegeans. Now in earlier times, the government of the Spartans had been bad, worse than almost any of the Greeks, as they were poorly organized as well as isolated from others. But they changed into a model state in the time of Lycurgus. He, a Spartiate and a man of some note, traveled to Delphi to consult the oracle. When he entered the great hall of the temple, the Pythian priestess spoke without hesitation these verses: *You, O Lycurgus, have come to my rich temple, / a man dear to Zeus and all those who have their homes on Olympus. / Yet I hesitate: is it to a man, really, or to a god that I give this prophecy? / Nay, 'tis to a god, or so I believe, O Lycurgus.* There are those who say that the priestess also dictated to him the elements of the government as now constituted for the Spartans. But the Spartans themselves tell this story, that Lycurgus imported

44 547/546 BC.

45 The Spartans had two kings at any given time; Leon and Hegesicles ruled in about 575–560 BC.

the constitution from Crete when his nephew, Leobotas, became king of the Spartans and Lycurgus was appointed his guardian. As soon as he was made guardian, Lycurgus changed the entire law code and took steps to make sure that the new laws were not violated. Afterward, he implemented the institutions that have to do with war—the soldierly brotherhood, the bands of thirty, and the common meals—and, in addition, the offices of Ephor and Elder. In 1.66
this way the Spartans evolved into a model state, and when Lycurgus died, they set up a temple and worshipped him as a great hero.

With a well-ordered government, good land, and plenty of men, Sparta grew quickly and flourished. No longer did it seem sufficient to pursue peaceful ways. In particular they came to look down on their neighbors, the Arcadians—surely the Spartans were their superiors, they thought—and so they came to consult the oracle at Delphi about that entire land. The Pythian priestess prophesied them this: *You ask me for Arcadia, do you? What you ask is great, and I will not grant it. / Many men there are in Arcadia, rugged acorn-eaters, / and these will stop you. Yet I will not begrudge all: / I will grant you to beat the Tegean land with stomping feet, / and to plot out its fair plain with a measuring line.*

The Spartans held back from the rest of Arcadia once they had heard the oracle's decree, but they attacked the Tegeans, bringing leg irons with them. Relying on the cryptic oracle, they thought they would enslave the Tegeans. But they were worsted in the fight, and those who were captured alive were made to wear the very fetters they had brought with them; and they worked the soil, plotting out the Tegean fields with a measuring line. The leg irons that had bound the Spartans were still extant in my day, hanging as dedications about the temple of Athena Alea in Tegea.

In this earlier war, the Spartans had always fared badly against the Tegeans. 1.67
But by the time of Croesus, when Anaxandrides and Ariston were kings at Sparta,[46] the Spartans had now gotten the upper hand. Here then is the story of how they did it. Since they were always being beaten by the people of Tegea, they sent sacred messengers to Delphi to inquire of the oracle, "To which of the gods should we pray, so as to gain superiority over the Tegeans?" The Pythian priestess prophesied them this: to bring back to Sparta the bones of Orestes, son of Agamemnon. But they were not able to discover where the tomb of Orestes was, so they sent to the god a second time, asking in what land Orestes lay. In reply to the sacred messengers, the Pythian priestess spoke these verses: *In the level plain of Arcadia there lies a place, Tegea, / where two winds blow by brawny force / and there is stroke upon stroke, and pain is laid upon pain. / There the earth that gives forth grain holds the son of Agamemnon. / Bring him back, and you will be lords over Tegea.*

On hearing the oracle, the Spartans were just as far as ever from finding the bones of Orestes, though they looked everywhere, until Lichas, one of the

46 c. 560–550 BC.

Agathoergi (as they are called), figured it out. Now these Agathoergi are the five eldest citizens who retire from the Spartiate cavalry each year. By law, they spend the first year of retirement in service as emissaries for the state,
1.68 busily doing whatever the Spartans send them to do. One of those, Lichas, made his discovery, partly by chance and partly by wits, while he was traveling in Tegea under a truce in effect at this time.

Lichas came upon a smithy working with iron and as he watched him beat and shape the iron he marveled at the workmanship. When the smithy noticed his amazement, he paused from his labor and said, "Spartan stranger, I suppose you would be really amazed, if you had seen what I saw—you who make my ironwork into such a marvel. I wanted to build a well in this courtyard here, but when I tried to dig the hole I came upon a coffin over ten feet long.[47] I couldn't believe that there used to be men that much bigger than men today, and so I opened it: and I saw a skeleton just as big as the coffin. Once I had measured it all, I covered the coffin back up." The Tegean man simply stated what he had seen; Lichas, however, pondered what had been said, and came to the conclusion that this was Orestes, just as the prophecy had spoken. This was how he interpreted it: the smithy's two bellows were the winds; the hammer and anvil the "stroke upon stroke"; and the beaten iron the "pain laid upon pain," guessing that this meant the ills brought upon men by iron's discovery.[48]

Such was his interpretation, and so he traveled back to Sparta and told the whole story to the Spartans. The Spartans then made a show of bringing a charge against him and sending him into exile. Lichas came to Tegea, told the smithy about his troubles, and tried to rent the courtyard—but the smithy was not renting it out. In time, though, he persuaded the smithy and took up residence there; whereupon he dug up the grave, collected the bones, and carried them back to Sparta. From that time,[49] whenever the Spartans and Tegeans came to fight, the Spartans had far the upper hand, they who, by then, controlled much of the Peloponnese.

1.69 All this Croesus learned through his inquiries. He then sent to Sparta messengers, laden with gifts, to ask for an alliance. On arrival they said, "Croesus King of the Lydians and other peoples, has sent us to say this to you: 'Spartans, the god at Delphi proclaimed an oracle, telling me to make Greece my friend and ally. I have made inquiry and find that you are the preeminent state in Greece, and I therefore, in accordance with the oracle, call on you to fulfill my wish to be your friend in peace, and your ally in war. I say this without trickery or deceit." Such was the message that Croesus announced through his heralds.

47 Over 3 m. "Seven cubits" says the Greek.

48 According to Hesiod's *Works and Days* the "Iron Age" is the current era, when food no longer grows on its own and the gods keep separate from men (and thus there are no longer demigods, the offspring of gods and mortals); rather, in the Iron Age life must be hard-won through the toil of farming with iron plows and fighting wars with iron weaponry.

49 c. 550 BC.

The Spartans in turn had already heard of the oracle that had come to Croesus, and were pleased at the Lydian embassy. So they swore oaths to guest-friendship and military alliance. In fact, certain kindnesses from Croesus had created a bond even before this. The Spartans had sent to Sardis to buy gold, wanting to use it for a statue of Apollo (the one that now is set up at Thornax in Laconia), but Croesus had bestowed it upon the buyers as a gift. For this reason too, then, the Spartans welcomed the alliance—as well 1.70
as because he had made them first choice among all the Greeks—and they declared themselves ready whenever he should send for them. Wanting to give something in return to Croesus, they also made him a bronze crater, engraved with fine figurines round its rim, and having a capacity of three hundred amphorae.[50] But this cauldron never reached Sardis, and there are two stories told as to why. The Spartans say that when the crater was on its way to Sardis, it went by Samos, and the Samians found out about the shipment, sailed out with their long ships, and seized it. The Samians, however, say that on its way to Sardis the Spartan embassy was delayed, and then learned that Sardis and Croesus had both been captured—so they put it up for sale in Samos. There some private citizens bought it and set it up in the temple of Hera. And when the ones who sold it got back to Sparta, perhaps they would then say that the Samians had seized it.

## Croesus Attacks Cyrus

*By this point in the narrative, the reader has been well trained to notice and reflect upon recurrent motifs like the wise advisor, the ambiguity of oracles, and so forth; and we will cease to note these. Two new motifs arise that prefigure important future events. First is the contrast of hard, rugged, poor peoples with those who are more "soft" and used to wealth and luxury. Second is the idea of critical natural boundaries (here the river Halys) that delineate "natural" divisions among people; the one who crosses such boundaries is taken to be a transgressor (a type of hubris), and thus a military attack can set in motion the machinery of divine retribution. Importantly, in Herodotus there is seldom a single chain of causation: the narrative characteristically puts forward a mix of impersonal (including divine), political, and personal (often family-related) motivations.*

Now as to Croesus, he had mistaken the oracle's meaning and thus began 1.71
to make plans to attack Cappadocia, fully expecting to overcome Cyrus and crush the power of the Persians. While Croesus was making his preparations for the Persian campaign, a man came to offer him advice—a man the Lydians considered wise even before but whose words now brought him to very high repute. His name was Sandanis, and this is what he said: "King, you prepare to march on men who wear trousers of leather, and whose other clothing is

50 Half the size of the crater described at 1.51, but still huge: roughly 3000 gallons, 12,000 liters.

leather as well;[51] who eat not as much as they want but as much as they have; who possess a rugged, rocky land. These men do not drink wine—they have only water—and do not eat figs, or any other delicacy. If you defeat them in battle, what will you get from them, they who have nothing? But if you are defeated, think what fine things you will lose. Once they have a taste of our luxuries, they will hold them tight, and never let go. For my part, I give thanks to the gods that they have never made the Persians think to march on Lydia." The Persians, you see, had no delicacy or luxury before the Lydians made their attack. But Croesus did not listen to what Sandanis had to say.

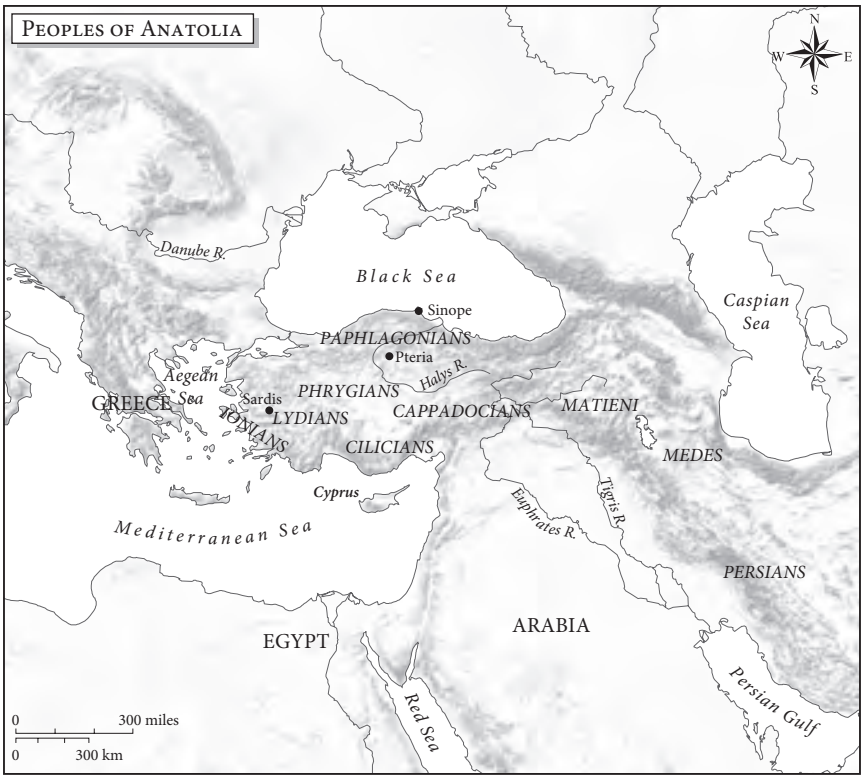
1.72 The Cappadocians are called "Syrians" by the Greeks. The Syrians, before the Persians came to power, were subject to the Medes, who at this time were ruled by Cyrus. The border between the kingdom of the Medes and that of the Lydians was the river Halys, which flows from the Armenian mountains through Cilicia, with the Matieni on the right and the Phrygians on the left, but then turns and flows northward, there skirting Cappadocia on the right and Paphlagonia on the left. The Halys thus carves off almost the entire western part of Asia, the lowland from the sea off Cyprus all the way up to the Black Sea. Here the peninsula of Anatolia is at its most thin, a five-day journey by land.[52]

1.73 Many were the reasons that Croesus marched on Cappadocia: for lust of land, wanting to add territory to his empire; because a trusted oracle had told him to; but also because he wanted to take revenge on Cyrus on behalf of Astyages. Now this man Astyages the son of Cyaxares was Croesus's brother-in-law as well as king of the Medes (that is, until Cyrus son of Cambyses came to overthrow him). And this is how Astyages came to be Croesus's in-law. In a time of civil strife, a band of Scythian nomads came as refugees to the land of the Medes, and at that time Cyaxares son of Phraortes son of Deioces held the kingship. In the beginning he treated them well—they were suppliants after all—and he held them in great esteem, asking them to teach some Median youths their language and also their skill in archery.

The weeks passed; time after time the Scythians went on the hunt, and time after time they brought something back. But one day it so happened that they failed to catch anything. They arrived at the court empty-handed and Cyaxares (who it seems had a nasty temper) mistreated them badly, far beyond the bounds of decency. To have suffered such an outrage was intolerable as well as undeserved, and so the Scythians formed a plan of action: taking one of the boys who had been given over for them to teach, they killed him and cut him up. They then prepared the meat just as they would game, took it to Cyaxares as though a gift from the hunt, and got out of the country as fast as they

51 Greeks and Lydians wore tunics and robes made of fabric, so this will seem obviously uncomfortable and distinctly less civilized.

52 "Five days" is a conventional expression, meaning "a few days." The actual distance is far greater, at least 285 miles (460 km).




**MAP 1.7**

could—to Sardis, to the Lydian king Alyattes son of Sadyattes. So, Cyaxares and his fellow diners partook of this meat, even as the Scythians presented themselves as suppliants to Alyattes.

Cyaxares demanded the Scythians be handed over, but Alyattes refused; 1.74
and so war broke out and for five years the Lydians and Medes fought. Often the Medes won, but just as often the Lydians were the victors. One battle was even fought at night. Also, in the sixth year of this evenly fought war, the two sides were joined, and it so happened, just as the battle was raging, that the day suddenly turned to night. This transformation of daylight to darkness had been foretold to the Ionians by Thales of Miletus, who fixed as the year this very one in which the eclipse occurred.[53]

The Lydians and Medes, when they saw night replacing day, stopped from their fighting, and both sides were anxious to broker peace. Appointed to negotiate the truce were Syennesis of Cilicia and Labynetus of Babylon. These two quickly agreed to swear oaths to peace, but also made a marriage connection part of the deal: they decided that Alyattes would give his daughter

53 Probably the eclipse of 28 May 585 BC. Thales was considered the earliest of the Seven Sages.

Aryenis to Astyages, the son of Cyaxares, reasoning that without a strong bond the treaty too would not remain strong. These peoples make sworn oaths using the same rituals as the Greeks; but, as an added seal to the oath, they also slit the skin on their arms, and lick up each other's blood.

1.75 This was the Astyages whom Cyrus overthrew, even though he was his mother's father, and Cyrus presently held him as prisoner—for reasons I will discuss later on. It was in objection to this very coup that Croesus sent to the Delphic oracle in the first place, to ask whether he should march upon the Persians. When he got the prophecy, a cryptic one as we have seen,[54] Croesus—convinced that the oracle favored himself—marched into Persian territory.

When Croesus reached the river Halys, my opinion is that he crossed over along existing bridges. But Greeks generally tell a different story, that Thales of Miletus got him across. The story goes that Croesus was at a loss as to how to cross the river (since the bridges of our time did not yet exist), and that Thales, who was with the army, worked it out so that part of the river flowed left of the army and part to the right. And this is how he did it. Starting upstream of the camp, he had them dig a deep channel in the shape of a crescent moon, so that it went along the back of where the camp was situated; the channel ran out from the ancient river bed and, once it had passed the camp, ran back in again. In this way, with the river split between the two channels, it proved possible to ford the river on both sides. Others tell yet a different story, that the whole of the river was diverted, and that the old river bed dried up. This, however, I cannot accept: for how then could they have crossed the river on their way back?

1.76 Now when Croesus had crossed the river with his army, he came to the part of Cappadocia called Pteria—the most powerful polity in the land, situated in the area near the city of Sinope on the Black Sea. There they set up camp. Then, they pillaged the Syrian farmsteads; captured the main city, enslaving its inhabitants; and overran all the towns round about. And so the Syrians—who had no responsibility for any of this—were driven from their homes.

Cyrus meanwhile collected his own army, enlisting all he could from the lands along his route, and came to face Croesus. Before his army had set out to march, Cyrus had sent heralds to the Ionians, urging them to revolt from Croesus—but they did not do as he asked. So, Cyrus arrived and set up camp opposite Croesus. There, in the territory of Pteria, the armies pitted strength against strength. The battle was fierce; many men fell on both sides; at last night came on and they separated, but neither side had won—so hard did the two armies fight.

1.77 Croesus blamed the size of his army—his fighting force was far fewer in number than that of Cyrus—and when Cyrus did not come out to fight on the next day, he marched back to Sardis. What he had in mind was to summon

54 1.53.

the Egyptians in accordance with their treaty (he had made an alliance with the Egyptian king Amasis, before he made the one with the Spartans), to send for the Babylonians (whose king was Labynetus at that time, and whom he had also made his ally), and to tell the Spartans to be there at the time appointed. Once the allies had all gathered and his own army assembled, his thinking went, they would march upon the Persians—at the start of springtime, right after winter had passed. Such were his thoughts, and so on arriving at Sardis he sent messengers to these allies, telling them to gather at Sardis four months hence. As for the current army, the one that had fought with the Persians, he sent away all the mercenaries and they scattered to their homes. As he saw it, there was no chance that Cyrus, whose army had been fought to a standoff, would march against Sardis.

1.78 As Croesus was thinking this through, the outer parts of the city started to swarm with snakes. And as the snakes appeared, the horses left off grazing in the pastures and came to gobble them down. Croesus recognized the sight as an omen, as indeed it was—and so he quickly sent sacred messengers to Telmessus, where there were seers who could interpret such things. Though the messengers got there, and the seers told them what the omen meant to convey, they could never tell it to Croesus—for before they had sailed back to Sardis, Croesus was captured. What the Telmessians revealed was that a foreign army was to come against the land of Croesus, and once it came it would conquer those native to the land. "The snake," they said, "is a child of the earth, and the horse a warrior and one who comes from afar." Such was the reply that the Telmessians fashioned for Croesus, at a time when he was already captured, but when they knew nothing yet of what had happened to Sardis and to Croesus himself.

## Cyrus Counterattacks: The Siege of Sardis

1.79 Even as Croesus was marching home after the battle of Pteria, Cyrus found out that Croesus was intending to disband his army for the season. Taking stock of the situation, he concluded that his best course was to march upon Sardis at once, before the Lydians could assemble their forces a second time. No sooner was this resolved than done: marching his army into Lydia Cyrus arrived as herald of his own coming, outpacing all news of the attack. Croesus was stunned—matters had worked out so entirely opposite to what he had expected—but he nonetheless led the Lydians out to give battle. And at that time, there were none in Asia more manly and valiant than the Lydians. They fought from horseback, carrying long spears, impressive in their equestrian skill.

1.80 The two armies joined battle on the great unwooded plain that lies before the city of Sardis. There several rivers, among them the Hyllus, join and dash their streams together into the largest of Lydian rivers, the Hermus; and the Hermus itself flows down from the mountains sacred to Cybele and disgorges into the sea near the town of Phocaea. Here, as he saw the Lydians taking up

their battle positions, Cyrus grew fearful of the cavalry, and so set in motion a plan that Harpagus, one of the Medes, had suggested. In the army's baggage train were camels carrying the food and equipment; these he had gathered and stripped of their cargo. He then had men mount them, using horse harnesses and saddles, and moved them into position—in front of the rest of his own army and opposite the horse of Croesus. He ordered the line of infantry to follow the camels, and behind the infantry he positioned the whole of his regular cavalry. When all was arranged, he instructed his men to kill without mercy every Lydian they encountered; but not to kill the Lydian king Croesus, not even if he resisted as they were trying to capture him.

Now the reason Cyrus had placed the camels opposite the Lydian cavalry was this: horses are frightened of camels and they can tolerate neither the sight nor the smell of them. Cyrus's stratagem had this aim, then: to render Croesus's horse useless—for the Lydian cavalry was the centerpiece of their prospects for victory. And in fact when they did join battle, the horses turned back as soon as they caught sight and smell of the camels, and Croesus found his hopes dashed. Yet even then the Lydians were not at all cowardly; rather, as they absorbed what was happening they leapt down from their horses and joined the infantry in the fight against the Persians. Time passed; many men fell on both sides; but the Lydians were forced to flee. Crowding into the city walls they now found themselves under siege.

1.81 So the Persian siege of Sardis began. Croesus, on the assumption that the siege would last a long time, sent messengers out to his allies. The first messengers had gone to tell the allies to assemble at Sardis in four months, but these he now dispatched to request immediate assistance—for he, Croesus, was under siege.

1.82 Among the allies to whom he sent were, of course, the Spartans, and at this very time the Spartans were involved in a dispute with the Argives over a region called Thyrea. The Spartans had occupied Thyrea, effectively annexing it from the Argolid. (At this time all the land to the west, extending as far as Males, belonged to the Argives, and not just the mainland but also Cythera and the other islands.)


**MAP 1.8**

The Argives arrived in force to liberate the occupied territory, and thereupon the two sides negotiated an agreement. Three hundred from each side were to do battle to the death; the land would belong, then, to whichever side prevailed. Moreover, the bulk of the armies were to leave, each to their own land, not staying to witness the fighting—the thought being that if the armies were present, the side being

worsted would intervene and try to defend their men. With this agreed upon, the armies withdrew, and the ones chosen, three hundred on each side, stayed behind. These now began to do battle. The fight was an even match and in the end, as night fell, only three—out of six hundred—were left: the Argives Alcenor and Chromius, and the Spartan Othryades.

The two Argives, joyous at their victory, rushed home to Argos. The Spartan Othryades, however, stripped the armor off the Argive corpses and dragged it to his camp, where he took up his position. The next day both sides came to learn the result of the contest. For quite a while they both claimed victory, the Argives saying that more of their men had survived, the Spartans that these men had run away, as anyone could see, and that their man had stayed and stripped the enemy corpses of their armor. In the end the quarrel grew violent and they fell to fighting. Many were killed on both sides; but the Spartans were victorious.

Ever since then, the Argives have worn their hair short, they who had before required men to wear their hair long; they made it a law, with a curse added thereto, that no Argive man should grow out his hair, nor any Argive woman wear golden jewelry, before they reclaimed Thyrea. The Spartans did exactly the opposite: they who had never worn their hair long before, from this moment forward always had long hair. As for the one Spartan left from three hundred, Othryades, they report that he was ashamed to return to Sparta, since the rest of the band of brothers had died. So he cut himself down on the spot, there in Thyrea.

1.83 These were the matters occupying the Spartans when the messenger came from Sardis, asking help for Croesus, whose city was under siege. The Spartans, despite their own difficulties, set out to lend assistance as soon as they heard the message. But just as they completed their preparations and were ready to launch the ships, a second message came, that the Lydian city was taken, and that Croesus had been captured alive. And so the Spartans left off, despite their distress at his great misfortune.

1.84 Here is how Sardis was captured. On the fourteenth day of the siege, Cyrus sent horsemen along the ranks, announcing a reward for the first man to scale the city wall. The army then made an assault in force, but without success. But when all the others had given up, a Mardian man, named Hyroeades, made an attack by climbing a part of the acropolis where no guard was posted. The Lydians, you see, had no fear of the wall being breached here, since the acropolis was sheer and impregnable on that side.

In that spot alone had Meles, an earlier king of Sardis, not led the lion that his concubine had borne to him. (Understand that the Telmessian seers had predicted that Sardis would be impossible to capture if the lion were brought about its walls.) Meles had led the lion around the rest of the city wall, to each spot where the acropolis was vulnerable; but he did not bother with this sheer and impregnable spot, where the acropolis faces Mount Tmolus.

The day before, this Mardian man, Hyroeades, had seen one of the Lydians climb down from the acropolis to pick up a helmet that had rolled down; noticing this, he set it in his heart. And so the next day he climbed up along that very route, and other Persians after him. More and more went up and over the wall and so Sardis was taken; and the Persians fell to plundering the entire city.

1.85 As for Croesus, this is how things turned out. He had a son who, as I mentioned earlier, was unable to speak, though a fine young man otherwise. Back in his time of prosperity, Croesus had done everything for him he could think of, including sending an inquiry to Delphi about his son. The Pythian priestess had spoken these verses in reply: *Croesus, born of Lydia, king of many, great fool: / Do not wish to hear in your palace the cry you pray so much for, / of your son speaking. Much better for you that it never be. / For he will speak his first words on a day of ill fortune.*

When the city wall was breached, one of the Persians, not recognizing Croesus, came up intending to kill him. Croesus saw his attacker but in his misfortune was beyond caring—it did not matter to him if he was struck and killed. But the son—the one who could not speak—when he saw the Persian attacking, was seized with terror at the calamity before him and broke out with a sound, saying "*Do not kill Croesus!*" These were the first words he uttered; and after that he spoke for the whole rest of his life.

1.86 The Persians occupied Sardis and took Croesus alive in the fourteenth year of his rule and on the fourteenth day of the siege. Just as the oracle had declared, a great kingdom had fallen—his own.

## Croesus on the Pyre

*The pyre is a large bonfire built to ceremonially incinerate corpses, and it is highly unusual to use it to burn people alive. In this famous and extraordinary scene, there are two allusions that cultured Greeks will have recognized. First is killing of enemies on the pyre. In Homer's* Iliad, *Achilles honors his dead friend Patroclus with a funeral at which he slaughters and adds to the pyre twelve of the Trojan enemy (*Il. *23.175f); in the* Iliad, *this human sacrifice is a strong signal that Achilles' excessive grief is transforming him from great warrior to someone dehumanized, increasingly detached from any sympathy for the mortal condition. The sudden sympathy shown by Cyrus for his defeated enemy is, then, evocative of Achilles' mercy toward Priam in* Iliad *book 24. Second is the allusion to the "twice-seven" (and we will have noticed the emphasis on fourteen already in the story of Croesus). The phrase "twice-seven" is used of the seven boys and seven girls whom, in Greek mythology, the Athenians sent each year as human sacrifices to the Minotaur, a half-man and half-bull monster.*

The Persians seized Croesus and took him to Cyrus. Cyrus had had his men pile up wood for a great pyre, and now had them place Croesus upon it, bound in shackles, and alongside him twice seven Lydian youths. It is not clear what he had in mind. Perhaps he wanted to make a human sacrifice to

**FIGURE 1.6 Croesus on the pyre. An Athenian painter named Myron decorated this vase not with the usual mythological episode, but with the scene of Croesus's death. Croesus is depicted sitting high up on a pyre, pouring a libation from a shallow bowl (to Apollo we assume), while a servant stokes the fire. Note the details not in our text: the intricately decorated throne, the royal scepter, the laurel wreath. Red-figure Attic amphora from the early 5th century BC**

one of the gods. Or maybe he wished to fulfill some vow. But it may be that he put Croesus up on the pyre when he found out his piety to the Greek gods, wanting to see if some divinity would save him from being burned alive. In any case, this, they say, is what Cyrus did.

As Croesus was standing on the pyre, even in such great misery the words of Solon came into his mind, words spoken with the gods' inspiration, that "no one who is still alive can be called blessed." He pondered this in a deep silence; then sighed and groaned, and thrice called out the name "Solon!" Cyrus

heard him and told the interpreters to ask who this was he called upon; so they approached him and asked.

For a time Croesus kept silent, not answering their questions; but then they used force. "He is the one whom I would have every king consult, regardless of the expense." What he said made no sense to them, so they asked him again what he meant. As they were persistent, and getting ready to use force again, he told the story—how Solon, an Athenian, had first come to Sardis, and though seeing for himself all of the Lydian's prosperity, he had made naught of it; how everything had turned out exactly as Solon had said; and how Solon's words were not so much for Croesus as for all mankind—though especially for those who think themselves prosperous or blessed.

Even as Croesus was telling his story, the fire was lit and the outer edges began to burn. But when Cyrus heard from the interpreters what Croesus had said, he had a change of heart, thinking, "I, a man, am burning alive another man, who as I am now once too was blessed." Besides, he was fearful of divine retribution, and was thinking how unstable were all human affairs. So he told his men to extinguish the blaze at once and to have Croesus and the Lydian youths step down. Try they did, but it was no longer possible to bring the fire under control.

1.87 The Lydians tell this tale of what happened next. Croesus, realizing that Cyrus had changed his mind, saw that the men were trying to extinguish the fire yet unable to get it under control. So he called out to Apollo in a loud clear voice: "If any of my gifts have pleased you, come to my side and save me from this evil!" With tearful cries he called upon the god; and suddenly in a clear and windless sky clouds gathered, a storm broke, a violent rainfall poured down—and the fire was extinguished.

## Cyrus and Croesus

*We get a view here of the complex intersection of human action, divine power, and preordained fate in the unstable fortunes of men. That the priestess herself explicates the god's riddling oracles is unusual, perhaps meaning to highlight the ironically close relation that Croesus has established with the god through his gifts and piety.*

In this way Cyrus came to know that Croesus was a noble man, loved by the gods. Fetching him down from the pyre Cyrus said, "Croesus, what man persuaded you to march upon my land and make yourself my enemy rather than my friend?" "King," Croesus replied, "I did it myself, to your good fortune and to my bad. But the one to blame for all this is the Greek god, who encouraged me to attack. No man is so foolish so as to choose war over peace: for in peace, children bury their fathers, while in war fathers bury their children. No, I suppose it was dear to some god that things work out this way."

1.88 So spoke Croesus; Cyrus released him from his shackles and sat him at his side, holding him in great esteem. Indeed Cyrus and all those nearby gazed

on him with wonder. Croesus, lost in thought, kept silence. After a while he looked up and turned his attention to the Persians who were plundering the Lydian capital. "King," he said, "should I say what I am thinking, or is it better to keep quiet for the present?" Cyrus told him to speak out as he pleased. So Croesus put this question to him: "What is it that these men of yours are actually accomplishing with their rushing about?" Cyrus said, "Why, they are despoiling your city and plundering your possessions." "But," Croesus replied, "it is not my city nor my possessions that they despoil; these things no longer have anything to do with me; no, they are grabbing and taking away *your* things."

1.89 Cyrus grew worried at Croesus's remark, so he sent the others away and asked Croesus his view of the present goings-on. Croesus said, "Since the gods have handed me to you as your slave, I think it right to let you know what I foresee. The Persians are by nature violent men and not used to riches. If you let them plunder and store up a great mass of wealth, this, I think, will be the outcome: expect the one who has stored up the most to challenge you. If this account seems right to you, do as follows: position your spearmen as guards at each of the city gates, and have them take the loot from each soldier as he carries it out, telling him that the property must be tithed—a tenth of it must be offered up to Zeus. In this way you will not be hated, as you would be if you took the loot by force; instead, the soldiers, thinking that you are doing what is right, will willingly hand it over."

1.90 Cyrus was delighted at these words, as he thought it excellent advice. Thanking Croesus, he bid his spearmen do exactly as Croesus had suggested. Then he spoke to Croesus, saying "Croesus, I see that you, once a king yourself, are willing to serve me well in both word and deed. Therefore ask for a gift, whatever you want to have, and it shall be yours immediately." "Master," he said, "you will do me a great favor if you let me ask a question of the god of the Greeks, the one I have particularly honored. I wish to send him these shackles, asking if it is his custom to deceive those who have done him well." Cyrus asked what offense prompted such a request. In return Croesus told him the whole story, his original plan and the oracle's reply, laying special emphasis on the rich offerings he had made, and how it was at the urging of the oracle that he came to attack the Persians.

He ended by asking once again that he be allowed to reproach the god in this way. Cyrus said, laughing, "This you will have from me, Croesus, and whatever you request in the future as well." So Croesus sent to Delphi men of Lydia, instructing them to set down the shackles at the entry of the temple, then to ask if the god was not ashamed that his oracles had urged Croesus to attack the Persians and thereby check the power of Cyrus, when from that he had gotten these first fruits—shackles. Asking this, they were then to inquire if it was the custom for Greek gods to be so thankless.

1.91 The Lydian men arrived at Delphi and did as they had been told. In reply the Pythian priestess said, "It is impossible even for a god to escape fate

preordained. Croesus has now paid for the crime of his ancestor of the fifth generation past, a spearman of the Heraclids, who, caught in a woman's scheme, killed his master, and held kingly power and office not rightly his. Apollo Loxias wanted that Sardis fall not in Croesus's time but in the time of his children—but the Fates proved impossible to turn aside. What favor the Fates allowed, however, Apollo brought to pass: for he held off the capture of Sardis for three years. Have Croesus understand this, then, that the capture of Sardis was three years later than was preordained; and also this, that Apollo was the one who helped him when he was being burned alive. As for the oracle, Croesus finds fault unjustly. The words of Apollo Loxias were: *if he makes war upon the Persians, he will destroy a great kingdom.* But Croesus needed to come and ask one more question—did the oracle mean his own kingdom or that of Cyrus?—if he was going to plan properly. Neither understanding what was said nor asking additional questions, Croesus himself clearly was the one to blame. Moreover, when he asked his last question, and the god spoke about the mule, not even this did Croesus understand. The mule was in fact Cyrus, he who was born from people unlike in race and breeding: his mother an aristocrat, a Mede and the daughter of Astyages king of the Medes; and his father, low-born, a Persian and the Medes' subject, an inferior who took as wife one to whom he should have been the slave." So did the Pythian priestess reply, and the messengers brought the reply back to Sardis, where they relayed it to Croesus. Croesus listened and came to realize that the fault was not the god's but his own.

1.92 Such then is the tale of Croesus's rule and the first subjugation of Ionia.

## The Marvels and Customs of Lydia

*As a sort of quiet coda to Croesus and the Tales of Lydia, the narrator appends a catalogue of extraordinary things about Lydia: the marvels, natural and man-made, and the customs. This is the first instance of what will be a habitual part of the rhythm to Herodotus's tales, and the reader will come to recognize these catalogues, and this deep interest in what is extraordinary in other cultures, as typical features.*

I must add that Croesus sent many offerings to Greece beyond those already mentioned. In Boeotian Thebes he dedicated a golden tripod to Ismenian Apollo; in Ephesus golden statues of oxen and many of the marble pillars; in the temple of Athena Pronaea at Delphi, a huge golden shield. These were the ones still in existence in my day; but others of his offerings had already perished. For example, in Milesian Branchidae, as my inquiries have uncovered, Croesus set up dedications equal in weight and quality to those at Delphi. The offerings to Delphi and Amphiaraus came from money that was his own, part of what he inherited from his father; but the rest came from the property of a man who was his enemy, a man who before Croesus's kingship conspired to promote Pantaleon as the next king of the Lydians.

This Pantaleon was the son of Alyattes, Croesus's brother though not of the same mother—Croesus was born to Alyattes by a Carian woman, Pantaleon by an Ionian. But Alyattes named Croesus, not Pantaleon, as the next king. So, when Croesus took over, he had this conspirator torn to shreds in the torture chamber. The estate, already pledged to the gods, Croesus then sent as offerings to the shrines, as I have described. So much then for Croesus's dedicatory offerings.

1.93 Lydia does not have much by way of marvels to record, at least not like other lands. An exception is the gold dust that washes down from Mount Tmolus. As for man-made monuments, Lydia does provide one that is much the biggest outside of Egypt and Babylonia. That is the tomb of Alyattes, the father of Croesus, which has a foundation made of huge stone blocks, with the remainder a mound of earth. The tomb was built by tradesmen, workmen, and prostitutes. In my day there were still five large pillars on the top of the mound, and they were engraved with inscriptions that said what parts each group had built; and when you add up the numbers, it proves that the prostitutes made the greatest contribution. (All daughters of common people in Lydia offer themselves as prostitutes, in order to collect money for a dowry; and they do this up to the point that they get married—the daughters thus give themselves away at the wedding.) The circumference of Allyattes' tomb is about four thousand feet and the width is thirteen hundred feet.[55] The tomb also has a large lake near it, Lake Gyges, which the Lydians say is fed by ever-flowing streams. So much then about the tomb.

1.94 Aside from prostituting the female children, the customs of the Lydians are similar to those of the Greeks. The Lydians were, to my knowledge, the first people to use coins struck from gold and silver,[56] and also were the first to set up retail shops. According to the Lydians themselves, the sports and games that they now have in common with the Greeks were their own invention; they invented this, they say, during the period when they colonized northern Italy.

The story goes like this. In the reign of Atys the son of Manes, a harsh famine gripped all of Lydia. For a while the Lydians held out, but as time went on and the famine did not stop, they sought relief. Various solutions were contrived, and so it was that at that time they invented the games played with dice and knucklebones and balls, and all games of this sort (excepting backgammon, however, which the Lydians do not claim to have discovered). The inventions helped fight the famine in this way: every other day, they played games all day long, to take their minds off food; on the other days, they stopped playing and ate. In this way they managed to survive for eighteen years. But the famine did not go away; rather, it pressed all the harder. So the king divided the Lydians into two groups, and made them draw lots, to decide

55 1200 by 400 m.

56 Probably right: our earliest surviving coins are in fact from 7th-century Lydia, and are made of electrum, an alloy of gold and silver.


**MAP 1.9**

which group would stay and which would leave the land; the king continued to govern those allotted to stay, and his son those who were leaving. The son's name was Tyrrhenus.

Those selected to be Tyrrhenus's companions left the country, and came down to Smyrna. There, they built ships, put aboard all their household effects, and sailed away to seek land and livelihood. They passed by many a people as they made their way, but, finally, they came to Umbria in the north of Italy, where they founded cities and have lived ever since. Instead of being called Lydians they are named after the king's son, the one who led them there. Thus they are named, after him, the Tyrrhenians.[57]

But back to the Lydians themselves. As I have described, the Lydians had by now been subjugated by the Persians.

57 Also known as the Etruscans (and their territory as Etruria).

# *Tales of Cyrus and the Rise of the Persians*

Just as with Croesus, Cyrus is introduced only for the tale then to backtrack and introduce his predecessors, the Median kings, as background. In formal terms the succession of Median kings prefigures the succession of Persian kings to come: first the founder (Deioces), then the failure (Phraortes, who disastrously loses his army), next the warrior and conqueror (Cyaxares, who conquers the Assyrians), and finally the brutal despot Astyages. Historians tend to accept these figures as early kings of Media, but for the two earliest kings there are significant differences between the accounts in Babylonian sources and in Herodotus. Moreover, though there is no question of the historicity of a Median nation of some sort, archaeologists have yet to uncover a Median cultural presence in the material record and the reality of an actual *empire* of the Medes has been doubted. At this remove—the reign of the first Median king is fully 250 years before Herodotus—there is, then, a mix of history and legend. As for sources to which Herodotus had access, we can guess that these were among the stories that circulated as part of the Persians' own stories about their origins as an empire.

The succession of Median kings also picks up on patterns already available to the reader. For example, the history of the Lydian kings from Gyges to Croesus established as normative the idea of a succession of eastern kings, increasingly imperialist, that led up to a final king guilty of a fundamental transgression—who then, by logic of the divine machinery, must pay the price, for himself and for his people. This, then, is the history that repeats itself, a sort of "history" that, again, interacts in a fascinating way with forces and motivations that are psychological and divine as well as political and military. The figure of Astyages, in particular, rewards comparison with the paradigm set by Croesus; the two share far more than the mere fact that both fall to the founding Persian king, Cyrus the Great.

Thematically, the central motif of *freedom* versus *slavery* comes to the fore, and this will now recur throughout the work. In Greek terms, to rule as king is to be the "master"; and to be ruled by a king is to be "enslaved." The concept of *political freedom* seems to us naturally core to democratic societies, but in Greece the centrality of freedom has a history as ideology quite apart from the rise of democracy in Athens. Even within an egalitarian democracy like the United States, the citizens are hardly "free" in all respects; and this suggests that in modern contexts, too, the word is used more metaphorically than we are accustomed to think.

## Cyrus the Great

*Note the way that the story here starts to take on a life of its own—it is the "story," not the narrator, that demands to go down this path of inquiry. The narrator, however, is the one who carefully evaluates which version of events to record.*

1.95 At this point our story (*logos*) demands that we find out more about Cyrus, that man who destroyed Croesus's empire; and also how it was that the Persians came to rule Asia. I know three other ways that the story of Cyrus is told: but the one I will record is the story given by Persians whose aim is not so much to glorify Cyrus and his deeds, but to tell what actually happened.

The Assyrians had ruled eastern Asia for five hundred and twenty years when the Medes became the first of those to revolt. For freedom they fought, bravely and nobly, and it came to pass that, pushing off the yoke of slavery, they became free. Following the Medes' success, the other peoples of Asia re-

1.96 volted too. And so all the peoples on the mainland became their own masters, but they would once again return to a tyrant's rule. Here's how that happened.

## Background: Deioces, and the Rise of the Medes

*The tale of Deioces reads like a parable of the rise of tyranny, with the paradoxical (and thought-provoking) conclusion that it is the people's very longing for justice that leads them to loss of freedom. Despite his strict attention to justness, we sense something inappropriate in Deioces' "passion for a tyrant's power"; and note that this phrase uses the same Greek word that was used in the case of Candaules, that early king of the Lydians who, you recall, had a (curiously inappropriate) "passion" for his wife in the story of Gyges (1.8). Key motifs such as the tyrant's duplicity and the power of the public gaze (and the power of its denial) we have seen before.*

Once there was a wise man among the Medes, named Deioces, the son of Phraortes. This man had great passion for a tyrant's power, and so he contrived the following. The Medes dwelt in small villages, and in his own village Deioces, a man of good reputation even before, now dedicated himself to act as a proper judge. At the time, there was a great deal of lawlessness throughout Media, and he understood full well that injustice finds its foe in the rule of law. The Medes in his village saw him as a man of character and thus chose him as their arbiter of disputes. Deioces in turn—since he was after power—made decisions that were rightful and just. From this he got many a good word from the villagers, so much so that people in other villages heard about Deioces and how he alone gave judgments that were truly just. So they too (who had met with unjust decisions before) now went often and gladly to Deioces to get him to act as judge. In the end, the people came to trust no one else.

1.97 Over time there were ever more people coming, as the word went about that his judgments turned out as the facts demanded. So Deioces—knowing that everything depended on him—now refused to go and sit in the place

where he had sat as judge in the past,[58] and said that he would no longer issue any verdicts. "What good does it do for me," he said, "to neglect my own affairs while sitting as a judge for my neighbors every day?" Now, the villages had even more robbery and lawlessness than before. So, the Medes gathered in an assembly to discuss the current situation (with his friends being particularly outspoken, as it seems to me); and this is what they said. "If things keep going the way they are now, we will be unable so much as to live in this country. So, come, let us set up a king for ourselves. In that way the country will be well governed, and we can go back to our work and cease being uprooted by lawlessness."

1.98 By arguments such as these they convinced themselves to take on a king. Then at once the question arose: whom should they make king? So much was Deioces on everyone's lips—his name proposed, his character praised—that in the end they agreed to appoint him. Deioces, for his part, demanded that they build him a palace worthy of a king and afford him the protection of a bodyguard. So, the Medes did this: they constructed a large, fortified palace at the spot he designated, and they let him pick his spearmen, chosen out of all the Medes.

Once power was his, Deioces forced the Medes to build for him a great citadel and to make the citadel strong, elevating this one city above all the other towns. Again the Medes obeyed, constructing large, strong walls about the city now called Ecbatana. They set the walls in concentric circles one inside another, devising it so that each wall stands higher than the one below by exactly the height of the towers. The fact that the land rises to a hilltop helps the design, I suppose, but the precise effect is still by contrivance. Altogether there are seven walls, and inside the innermost one stands the royal palace and treasury. As for the outermost wall, it is approximately the size of the city wall around Athens.[59] This outermost wall has white towers, the next black, the third crimson, the fourth cyan, the fifth orange. The towers of these five thus are painted, made of glazed bricks, but the two last walls have towers coated with metal, one silver and one gold.[60] Such were the walls Deioces had 1.99 built to protect himself and his palace; as for the people, he bid them live round about, in the area just outside the walls.

Once the building was complete, Deioces became the first to establish certain remarkable protocols pertaining to the king: that no one be admitted to the king's presence; that all communication be made by messenger; that the king not even be seen by anyone. In addition, he made it an offense for any to laugh or spit in the king's presence.

58 There were no courts of law, and so, by convention, such "wise men" would sit at the town gate to offer themselves as arbiters.

59 Thucydides (2.13.7) tells us that the walls of Athens were 60 stades, about 6.5 miles (10.5 km). The comparison to Athens shows that part (not all) of the expected readership is assumed to live in or have traveled to Athens.

60 The description here suggests an elaborate type of ziggurat, but no citadel quite like this has been found. Ecbatana (near modern Hamadan in Iran) has not been excavated.

The reason Deioces worked to exalt himself was this: so that his familiars—those who had grown up with him, and were neither from lesser families nor lacking in manly virtue—not grow irritated and plot against him. He reasoned that, as long as they never saw him, they would come to
1.100 think of him as someone no longer at all like themselves. Once the protocols were in place and he had made himself strong in the kingly power, Deioces was careful to continue as a strict, stern judge. The people would write out their accusations and send them in to him; and he would write down his decision and send it back out. That's how he handled legal disputes, but he also arranged this: whenever he heard of someone abusing power, he had the man arrested and a verdict rendered in proportion to the wrongdoing. And everywhere throughout the kingdom there were spies and informers to bring him these reports.

1.101 Deioces, then, joined together a nation of the Medes under his rule—and unlike other kings, of the Medes alone. And these were the tribes that formed this nation: the Busae, Parataceni, Struchates, Arizanti, Budii, Magi.

1.102 Deioces ruled for fifty-three years, and at his death, the kingship passed to his son, Phraortes. Once king, the son was not content with ruling over only the Medes, so he first attacked the Persians and they first were made subject to the Medes. Afterward, since he had two peoples under his control and both of them rugged and fierce, he moved to conquer the rest of Asia, marching from one people to the next. In the end, he made an attack on the Assyrians—those who once held Nineveh and earlier had ruled over everyone, at that time bereft of allies (since they had all revolted) but still prosperous and strong. In the attack Phraortes himself was killed, and most of his army with him. He had ruled for twenty-two years.

1.103 At the death of Phraortes, the kingship passed to Cyaxares son of Phraortes son of Deioces.

*A description of the reign of Cyaxares now follows. He was a greater warrior than his father and defeated the Assyrians. His reign lasted 40 years, during which there was an incursion by the Scythians into Asia; that ended when Cyaxares invited the Scythian leaders to dinner, got them drunk, and slaughtered them, thus winning back his kingdom.*

**TABLE 1.2: THE KINGS OF MEDIA**

| Name | Reign according to Herodotus | Reign according to modern historians |
|---|---|---|
| Deioces | 700–647 BC, 53 years | 727–675 BC |
| Phraortes | 647–625 BC, 22 years | 674–653 BC |
| (Scythians) | (included in reign of Cyaxares) | 652–625 BC |
| Cyaxares | 625–585 BC, 40 years | 624–585 BC |
| Astyages | 585–550 BC, 35 years | 585–550 BC |

## The Birth and Upbringing of Cyrus

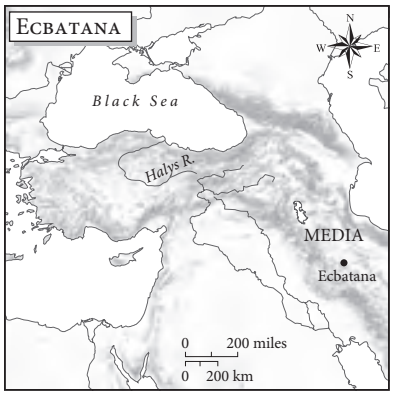
*This fairy-tale birth narrative would have reminded the cultured Greek of the myth of Oedipus, since in both tales the exposure of the baby is central, as is the irony that mortals inevitably and foolishly bring fate to fruition through exactly the actions they take in trying to evade it. Infanticide was a fact of the real world in antiquity, but it was a drastic act, one that has the potential to destabilize, as the myths seem to contemplate. A particularly fascinating aspect of the tale is the notion that a person is inherently "free" or "slave"—in the Greek view, a man can be enslaved and yet "free"* by nature, *since slavery is a characteristic of the family one is born into and not simply a social circumstance.*

1.107 After the death of Cyaxares, the kingship passed to his son, Astyages. Astyages had a daughter whom he named Mandane. He had a dream in which this daughter peed and peed, so much so that the urine filled up his city, and then spilled out, overflowing all of Asia. He asked the Magi dream-interpreters what this vision meant, and each detail he learned from them filled him with fear. When Mandane was at the age to marry, he therefore did not give her to any of the Medes of her rank—in his fear of the dream vision—but rather to a Persian, whose name was Cambyses, and who, as he learned, was from a good family and of gentle disposition. And so he gave her to Cambyses, even though he considered Cambyses inferior to even the most middling of the Medes.

1.108 But in the first year of their marriage, Astyages had another vision. He dreamed that from the genitals of this daughter sprouted a vine, and this vine spread out over all of Asia. Such was the vision, and so he consulted with the dream-interpreters again; he subsequently summoned his daughter from the Persians—then with child and nearing her delivery date—and when she arrived he put her under guard, having in mind to kill the child when it was born. This vision, you see, had been interpreted by the Magi to mean that the offspring of this daughter would come to supplant Astyages as king. So, Astyages kept her under guard, and when Cyrus was born, he summoned Harpagus, a kinsman and the steward of his properties, a man whom he trusted above all.

"Harpagus," he said, "there is a certain matter I want you to take care of. You must handle it flawlessly. Do not expose me to danger by going to others—or you will find yourself in a trap of your own making. Now, take the child born to Mandane, carry it to your house, and kill it. And afterward, bury it in whatever way you see fit." "King," Harpagus replied, "you have never yet had cause to find fault in the man before you, and I will continue to manage your affairs with care. If it is your will so to do, my duty is to serve you and to carry out your wish."

1.109 Such was Harpagus's reply. The infant was handed over to him, decked out in fine burial garb. Harpagus returned to his house, in considerable distress, and when he got there he told his wife the whole story, everything that Astyages had said. "What do you intend to do?" she asked. He replied, "Not what Astyages has commanded—not even if his madness makes him worse




**MAP 1.10**

than he is already would I consent to take part in such a murder. Many are the reasons why. The boy is my kinsman. Astyages is old and without male issue: if the throne passes to this daughter when he dies—whose son he now wants to have me kill—what will I be left with, except the most extreme peril? No, for my own personal safety, the boy does have to die—but the killing has to be done by one of Astyages' servants and not one of my own."

1.110 So saying, he turned at once to send a messenger to one of Astyages' cowherds—one who tended a suitable pasture upon a remote, wild mountainside. His name was Mitradates. Living with the cowherd was a fellow slave, a woman whose name in Greek was Cyno, that is, "She-Dog," but in the Median language Spako (the Median word for dog being *spaka*). The cow pasture that Mitradates tended was on the lower slopes of mountains to the north of Ecbatana, toward the Black Sea. The rest of Media is completely flat, but there, on this side of the Saspires, the Median land is very mountainous, steep, and densely wooded.

The cowherd came with great haste to the summons, and Harpagus said, "Astyages bids you take this infant and expose it in a remote spot on the mountainside, so that he dies as quickly as possible. And he bids me add this: if you do not kill the child, but you keep it alive by some means, you will suffer a most grim death. I myself, by his command, will come to examine the corpse once it is exposed."

1.111 When the cowherd had heard all this, he picked up the infant and took the same road back home to the farmstead. Now his wife, who was ready to give birth any day, by some stroke of fate bore her baby while the cowherd was at the city. They were much in each other's thoughts—he, worried about his wife's delivery; she, about her husband's unusual summons from Harpagus. He arrived home before expected and, as soon as she saw him, the wife asked—before he could get in a word—why Harpagus had summoned him with such urgency.

"Dear wife," he said, "when I got to the city I saw and heard what no man ought ever to see, and what ought never to come to pass for our masters.[61] The whole house of Harpagus was filled with tearful cries and sorrow. Not knowing what to make of this, I went inside; and, as soon as I got in, I saw an infant fussing and crying, decked out in gold and wrapped in richly colored

61 "What one ought not to see" should remind the reader of the Gyges tale. As there, this is a signal that something has been done that transgresses a cultural boundary.

cloth. When Harpagus saw me, he told me to take the child, carry it home, and expose it on the most remote part of the mountainside, saying that this was the behest of Astyages, and making grave threats if I didn't do so. So I picked up the child and carried it off, thinking that it belonged to one of the servants—I could hardly have guessed where he actually came from! Anyway, I was confused when I noticed that he was decked out in gold and rich robes, and likewise by the tearful cries and sorrow that I had seen in the house of Harpagus. But straightway on the road I heard the whole story from the servant who was leading me out of the city, the one who had put the baby into my arms—that this was the child of Mandane daughter of Astyages and Cambyses son of Cyrus, and that Astyages had ordered that it be killed. And, look, here it is!"

1.112 With that, the cowherd uncovered the baby and showed it to her. Seeing that the child was big and healthy and beautiful, she started to cry, grabbed her husband about his knees in supplication, and begged him not to expose it. But he explained that it was not possible to do otherwise. "Agents will come from Harpagus to examine the corpse, and if I have not done as ordered, the death they will mete out will be a gruesome one." Unable to convince her husband, the wife tried a second time: "I see that I cannot dissuade you from exposing the baby, so let's do as follows. Since necessity commands that they look upon a baby's corpse, take the one in here—the one I gave birth to while you were gone, a stillborn birth—and set that one on the mountainside; and let's raise the other, the son of Astyages' daughter, as if it were our own. In that way the masters won't catch you doing anything wrong, and it will work out for us not at all badly—our dead child will get a burial fitting a king, and this living child will not lose his life."

1.113 To the cowherd, this seemed good advice, given the situation, and so he carried out her plan at once. He picked up the child he had been about to put to death and handed him over to his wife; his own dead child he took and laid in the crib that he had used for carrying the other. Decking out his own child with all the other's fine clothing and ornaments, he carried it to the most remote part of the mountainside and set it out. When his child had lain out for two days, the cowherd went into the city (leaving one of the other cowherds as a guard) and told Harpagus that he was ready to show him the child's corpse. Harpagus sent the most trusted of his spearmen, and through them he examined and verified the corpse; which they then buried, in actuality the cowherd's child. That one then was buried; the other child, the one later named Cyrus, was taken in and raised by the cowherd's wife (though presumably she named him something other than Cyrus).

1.114 When the boy was ten, something happened that revealed who he really was. The story goes like this. In the village where the herdsmen lived, he was playing a game in the street with the other children. As part of the game the children chose him as king—this boy who was thought of as the cowherd's child. He ordered some to build him a palace, others to serve as his spearmen,

and no doubt one of them to act as the King's Eye,[62] and to someone he gave the privilege of conveying his messages—he assigned tasks to each. One of the children playing with them was, however, a child of Artembares, a man of repute among the Medes, and he refused to do what Cyrus ordered. So Cyrus bid the rest of the boys seize him, and when they obeyed, he whipped him, treating him very roughly.

This boy, as soon as they let him go, was extremely angry at what he had had to endure—so unfitting to his rank!—and so he went down to the city, to his father, complaining loudly of what Cyrus had done (though of course he did not say Cyrus, which was not yet his name, but spoke of the son of the cowherd). Artembares was incensed and went at once to Astyages, taking his son with him. He described the wrongs his son had suffered, concluding: "King, we have been assaulted, violently, by your slave—the son of a cowherd!"; and with that he showed the king his son's shoulders.

1.115 Astyages had heard and seen quite enough: he determined to punish the boy, as Artembares' honor required. So he summoned the cowherd and the cowherd's son. When both were before him, Astyages fixed his eye on Cyrus and said: "You, the son of a man like that, do you dare to strike in so outrageous a manner the son of a man like this, a preeminent man in my court?" "Master," he replied, "I did this to him with justice. The boys of the village—he is one of them—were playing a game and set me up as king, since I seemed best to fit the part. The rest of the boys did as they were commanded, but this boy did not: he refused to listen, and defied me—until I made him pay the price. If for this I deserve to be punished, then, look, here I am, at your disposal."

1.116 As the boy was speaking, a glimmer of recognition came to Astyages: the profile of the boy's face seemed similar to his own, the reply was more that of a free man than a slave, the timing of the exposure seemed to match the age of this boy. Struck by all this, he remained speechless for a while. He struggled to gather himself and then spoke—wanting to get rid of Artembares, so that he could get the cowherd alone and question him—"Artembares, I will act on this matter so that you and your son have no further cause for complaint." Artembares was then sent away, and at Astyages' bidding the servants led Cyrus inside.

Left entirely alone with the cowherd, Astyages asked him where he had gotten the boy and who had handed him over. The cowherd claimed the boy as his own and said that the woman who bore him was still at his side. "You are not thinking this through clearly—or do you like being tortured?"—and just as Astyages said this, he gave the signal for his spearmen to seize him. The spearmen tortured the cowherd and thus he came to reveal the facts of the

62 The famous "King's Eye" is a sort of chief inspector, who uses the "eyes and ears" of spies spread throughout the kingdom to ensure against plots and corruption detrimental to the king's interests (a practice pioneered by Deioces, the first king of the Medes: 1.100).

case. Starting at the beginning he told everything in detail, truthfully, ending with entreaties, begging for mercy.

## The Punishment of Harpagus

*Like several stories in Greek mythology, this story involves androphagy (the eating of a human). The archetypal myth is the story of Atreus, who in revenge killed the children of his brother Thyestes and served them for dinner; Thyestes' son Aegisthus in the next generation then takes his own revenge, killing Atreus's son, Agamemnon. In Herodotus's lifetime, Aeschylus's trio of tragedies, the* Oresteia *(part of which is the play,* Agamemnon*) explored the difficulty of finding "justice" in this sort of perpetuated cycle of revenge, and the role of city and civilization in formulating new modes of justice.*

1.117 Once he had gotten the truth out of him, Astyages thought no more about the cowherd. Harpagus, however, he found much to blame, and so he bid the spearmen summon him. Harpagus appeared before him, and then he asked, "Harpagus, by what means did you make away with the child born from my daughter, the one I handed over to you?" Seeing the cowherd in the palace, Harpagus did not turn down the path of lies, for he did not want to be proven false and caught.

"King," he said, "when I took the baby, I debated with myself how to fulfill your intent and in no way fail you, but also not to be the actual murderer in your daughter's eyes—or in your own. So I did this. I summoned the cowherd and handed over the infant, saying that this was your behest, to kill it. And that was no lie—this was your very order. So, I handed it over, telling him to expose the child on a remote mountainside and to stay and watch until it died. And I made grave threats if he did not do exactly as commanded. When he had followed these orders and the child was dead, I sent my most trusted eunuchs[63] and—through them—I examined the corpse and buried it. That, my king, is how it came about, and the means by which the child met its death."

1.118 Thus Harpagus took the straight road, telling a truthful account—but Astyages concealed the deep anger that dwelt within. First, he repeated for Harpagus what the cowherd had told him, and then, once he had gone through the whole story, he concluded with the remark that the boy was alive and that things had turned out for the best. "I have been greatly distressed at what was done to this child, and the falling out with my daughter has been no light matter. What a lucky turn of events this is! So, come, send your own son to join the newcomer, and sit beside me at dinner tonight—to the gods responsible for this I will give a thank-offering for his deliverance."

63 Persons of high rank in the east often used eunuchs as the servants most close to them, since these could be trusted to interact with the wife and other females without danger, and could not normally aspire to high rank or rule.

1.119 On hearing this, Harpagus got on his knees and bowed before the king, thinking how great it was that his transgression had turned out to be just what was needed, and that by this stroke of luck he had even been invited to dine at the palace. So, he went home, and as soon as he arrived, he sent off his son—he had only the one, a youth of about thirteen years—telling him to go to Astyages' palace and to do whatever Astyages bid. Overjoyed, he told his wife all about his encounter with the king.

But as soon as the son arrived Astyages cut his throat, and he then chopped the body limb from limb, roasting some of the flesh and boiling the rest. When the meat was done, he set it aside in readiness. The appointed hour for dinner came along and the diners, including Harpagus, arrived. For the others, and for Astyages himself, the tables alongside were heaped with the flesh of sheep, but for Harpagus, it was the flesh of his own child—everything, that is, except the head and hands and feet, which lay apart in a covered basket.

Once Harpagus seemed to have had enough of the feast, Astyages asked him if he had enjoyed the meal. Harpagus said that he had enjoyed it very much. Those to whom it had been appointed now brought forth the head and hands and feet of the child, all covered up, and standing next to Harpagus they told him to uncover it and take whatsoever he desired. Harpagus did as he was told, uncovered it, and saw before him the remains of his son. As he gazed upon it, he did not lose control, but kept within himself.[64] Astyages asked him if he knew which beast's flesh he had feasted upon. Harpagus said that, yes, he knew, and that he approved all that the king did. With that reply, he picked up what was left of the flesh of his child and went home—intending, I suppose, to gather it all together and bury it.[65]

## How Cyrus Became King

*Here again the story contemplates the inscrutability of divine messages, and the ways in which mortal foresight and preparation remain subject to fate. As often, there is an abiding irony in the tale—freedom for the (enslaved) Persians must mean slavery for the (free) Medes, and that prompts the involved reader to think further about the nature of just governance. Note also how quickly the narrative moves when it reaches the climactic engagement between the armies: the master stylist does not linger over battle details when that is not his focus.*

1.120 Such, then, was the punishment that Astyages exacted on Harpagus. He next needed to figure out what to do about Cyrus, so he summoned the same Magi who first had interpreted the dream for him. Upon their arrival, he asked them again how they interpreted what he had seen in the dream. They

64 Just as the wife of Candaules controlled herself and did not cry out when she saw Gyges in her bedroom (1.10).

65 We have seen the motif of children served at a banquet before: recall that this was the crime of the uncivilized Scythians, who served to Cyaxares—interestingly, the father of Astyages—the flesh of boys from his household (1.73).

answered him as before, that the child would surely have been king had he survived and not died first. Then he told them: "The child exists, he is alive; and when he was living in the countryside, the other boys in the village set him up as king. And he did all that a true king would do, setting up spearmen and sentinels and message-bearers and everything else as though he was the ruler. So what now, in your view, does this seem to bode?"

The Magi replied: "If the child is alive and has been made king without anyone's intervention, then take heart and be of good cheer. For he will not be king a second time. Even prophesies sometimes extend to small matters, and as for dreams, their perfect fulfillment can be something entirely trivial." "Magi," he replied, "I too am very much of that opinion, that with the child named king the prophetic dream has been realized. This boy, in my opinion, is no longer anything to be afraid of. Yet, nonetheless, advise me and consider it closely: what is going to be the safest course for my house—and for you?"

"King," the Magi replied, "it is important to us too that your reign carry on and prosper. The rule will fall into the hands of outsiders, if it passes to this boy—for he is a Persian while we are Medes; we then would become the outsiders, made into slaves and ignored by the Persians. As long as you, a fellow Mede, remain king, we have our share of power and by your grace we enjoy great honors. Thus in every way it is in our interest to look out for you and your kingship. If now we foresaw anything frightening in the situation, we would tell you. But as it is, the dream has come to nothing; so we ourselves feel confident and no longer afraid, and we encourage you to take much the same attitude. As for the boy, send him away, out of your sight, back to the Persians and the ones who bore him."

1.121 Astyages was delighted to hear this. So he summoned Cyrus and told him, "My child, driven by a vision I saw in a dream—one that did not come to pass—I tried to harm you; but your own destiny has kept you alive. Go now to the Persians, and good luck to you; I will send an escort to show you the way. When you get there you will discover your father and mother—and by that I do not mean Mitradates the cowherd and his wife."

1.122 With these words, Astyages sent Cyrus on his way. So Cyrus returned to his homeland, to the palace of Cambyses, where his parents received him; and when they learned who he was they embraced him with great affection. They of course had thought he had died right after he was taken away, and they wanted to know at once how he had managed to live. So he told them, saying that, before, he had been very much in the dark, but on the way he had heard about what had happened—he had thought, he explained, that Astyages' cowherd was his father, but his escorts had told him the story from start to finish during the journey from the city. He also told them how the cowherd's wife had raised him, and he enumerated her virtues at length—the woman Cyno was everywhere as he told his story. The parents then took this name and—so that the child would seem to the Persians to have survived yet more

miraculously—spread the rumor that a she-dog had suckled Cyrus when he was exposed.[66] From that origin the legend has grown.

1.123 Now as Cyrus grew into a man he proved both the most valiant and the best-liked of his cohort—and so Harpagus tried to win him over, sending him presents, eager to take vengeance on Astyages. It was not possible, he thought, for a private citizen like himself to exact revenge, so as he watched Cyrus grow up he tried to enlist him as an ally—thinking that the wrongs Astyages had inflicted on Cyrus were not unlike his own. Indeed, even before this he had taken steps. Astyages' regime was brutal and repressive, so Harpagus had spoken with each of the Median leaders in turn, trying to convince them of the need to overthrow Astyages and make Cyrus king instead. He got them to agree; everything was now ready, and it was time to let Cyrus know of his plan. But Harpagus had no way to communicate—Cyrus was living among the Persians, and there were sentries posted on all the roads.

So he came up with this idea. Procuring a rabbit, he split open its belly—not removing the fur but leaving it intact—and inside the belly he placed a scroll. On the scroll he had written all that was necessary. He then sewed up the belly, and handed the rabbit to the most trusted of his servants, supplying him with nets too, so that he would look like a hunter. This servant he sent to the Persians, telling him to hand the rabbit to Cyrus and to tell him in person to cut open the rabbit with his own hands, and to have no else present when he did so.

1.124 All went just as planned. Cyrus got the rabbit, cut it open, and picked up the scroll he found lying inside. The message read: "Child of Cambyses, it must be that the gods watch over you—for how else could you have had such good fortune?—and so the time has now come for you to take vengeance on Astyages, your murderer. As you know, if he had had his way you would be dead; but as it is you survive, thanks to the gods—and thanks to me. Long ago, I suppose, you heard the whole story, what was done to you but also about me—what terrible things Astyages made me suffer. And why?—because instead of killing you, I handed you over to the cowherd. Now, if you will listen to me, you will become king over all the lands that Astyages rules. Persuade the Persians to rise up and march against the Medes. You will have all you could desire if Astyages appoints me as the general to face you, but it will be the same if some other of the Medes is appointed—the leaders, you see, are going to desert Astyages and take your side and work to pull him down. Everything here is ready: so do as I say, and do it quickly."

1.125 The message set Cyrus thinking. By what clever scheme could he get the Persians to revolt? On reflection, the best idea seemed to be to do as follows. Writing what he needed onto a scroll, he gathered the Persians together and

66 Similarly, the founding rulers of Rome, Romulus and Remus, were said to have been suckled by a she-wolf. This is a common folktale motif, one that shows the powerful destiny that attaches to kings; note here how the legend is included even as the narrator historicizes how it came to be.

then unrolled the scroll and read aloud, "Astyages hereby appoints Cyrus commander of the Persians." Then he spoke to them: "Now, Persians, I order each of you to be here tomorrow carrying a scythe." So he commanded. Now, among the Persians there are many tribes, and only certain of these did Cyrus assemble to revolt from the Medes. These (on whom the rest of the Persians rely) are the Pasargadae, Maraphii, and Maspii. The Pasargadae are the bravest of the three—and from that tribe come the Achaemenids, the royal family of Persia. The other Persian tribes are the Panthialaei, Derusiaei, Germanii (all of which are farming tribes) and the Dai, Mardi, Dropici, and Sagartii (all nomadic).

1.126 When all were there, carrying their scythes as ordered, Cyrus told them to spend the day clearing brush from a very large field, roughly eighteen to twenty stades square,[67] full of thistle and weeds. And when they were done with the task appointed, he told them to wash up and come again on the morrow. In the meantime, Cyrus gathered together all the goats and sheep and cattle belonging to his father and had them slaughtered; and to that he added wine and bread in proportion, and so got ready to welcome the Persian army. Arriving the next day, the men were feasted as they lounged about on the newly mowed meadow. When they had finished eating, Cyrus asked them, "Which do you prefer, the work we did yesterday or what we have today?" They replied that there was a great gulf between the two: "Yesterday everything we had was bad; today, everything is good."

Picking up on their words, Cyrus then disclosed his whole plan: "Men of Persia," he said, "here is how it stands for you. If you are willing to do as I say, these and myriad other good things will be yours, and you will not have to work like a slave. But if you are not willing to act, countless pains will be yours, just like yesterday. So, do as I say, and take back your freedom. For my part, I think the gods had me born to take this very matter into my hands. And I think you are not inferior to the Medes in warfare or anything else. That then is how it stands. Come now, revolt against Astyages, and do it at once!"

1.127 The Persians embraced him as their leader and gladly asserted their independence—they had long resented having the Medes as their masters. When Astyages heard what Cyrus was doing, he sent a messenger to summon him to the court. Cyrus, however, told him to give the king this message: "You, Astyages, will see me a good deal sooner than you might like." So, Astyages armed all his men, and—blinded by the gods—he appointed as their commander Harpagus, forgetting what he had done to him. The Medes marched out and met the Persians in battle. Some of them fought (those who were not in on the plot), and some deserted to the Persians; but most played the coward and ran away.

1.128 Such was the disgraceful collapse of the Median army. As soon as Astyages heard the news, he railed at Cyrus, saying: "Not so easily will Cyrus take his

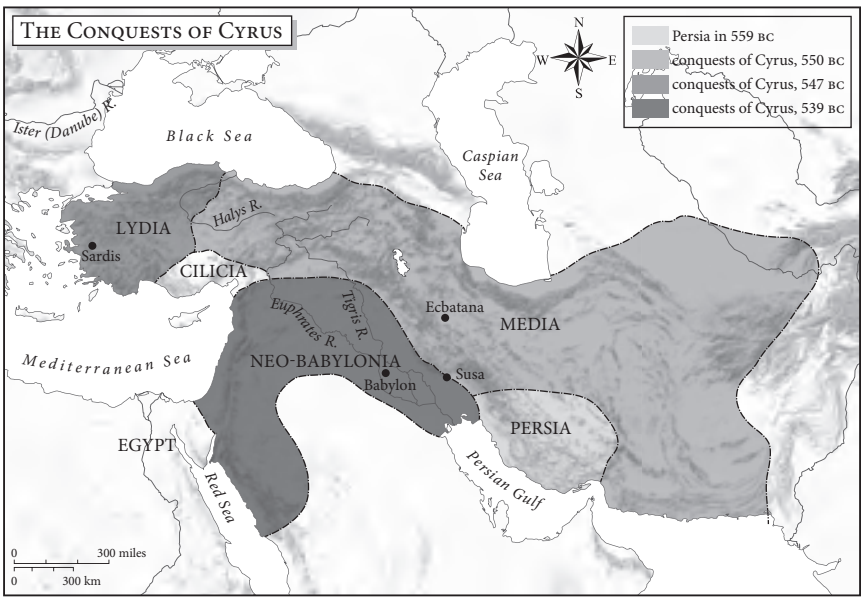
67 About 2 miles (3.5 km) along each side, almost 3000 acres.

pleasure." With those words, he first had the Magi dream-interpreters impaled, those who had persuaded him to let Cyrus live. Then, he armed the Medes left in the city, young men and old. He led them out to offer battle, but the Persians triumphed; and, with the loss of all his men, he himself was captured alive.

1.129 Harpagus stood next to the captive, Astyages, taunting and jeering, saying many cruel things—for he was thinking of that meal in which the king had had him feast on his own son's flesh—and among them was this question: "How does it feel to be Cyrus's captive slave rather than a king?" Astyages fixed his eye on him and asked in return, "Is this coup by Cyrus your doing?" Harpagus replied, "I wrote the secret message urging revolt, so, yes, by rights it is indeed my doing."

Astyages said, "Then you expose yourself, Harpagus, as both the stupidest and the most unjust man alive. Stupidest, since—if what has happened was really your doing—you could have been king, and yet you placed the power in the hands of another; most unjust, if, because of that dinner, you have enslaved the Medes. Now if you absolutely had to confer the kingship on someone else and not to keep it for yourself, the right thing to do was to entrust that honor to one of the Medes, not one of the Persians. As it is, the Medes—who are without blame in this affair—are now slaves, they who were masters before, and the Persians, once our slaves, now have become masters of the Medes."

1.130 That then is how Astyages' reign of thirty-five years came to its end. As a result of his cruelty, the Medes were made to bow to the Persian yoke, after




**MAP 1.11**

ruling for one hundred and twenty-eight years (excepting that time when the Scythians held sway) over upper Asia, the whole of the eastern, upland part of Asia beyond the river Halys.[68] In a later age they regretted their submission and rose up against Darius; but the insurgents were defeated in battle and again subdued.

In the time of Astyages, then, Cyrus and the Persians rose up against the Medes, and they ruled over Asia from that point forward. As for Astyages, until he died he was kept at Cyrus's court without further punishment.

Such is the story of Cyrus's birth and upbringing and how he became king. He later defeated Croesus—who, as I have already explained, was the aggressor, responsible for the first act of injustice.[69] With his victory over the Lydians, Cyrus thus came to rule over all of Asia.

*We now skip a section in which the marvels, monuments, and remarkable customs of Persia are listed, much like the section at the end of the Tales of Lydia (1.92–94). That is followed by a lengthy account of Cyrus's reign, focusing on his conquests of Ionia and Asia Minor, and culminating in the story of his siege and capture of mighty Babylon. We pick up the tale as Cyrus now takes his army far to the north and the east, having decided to attack the Massagetae.*

68 Falling roughly in the period 700–550 BC. See table on p. XX.

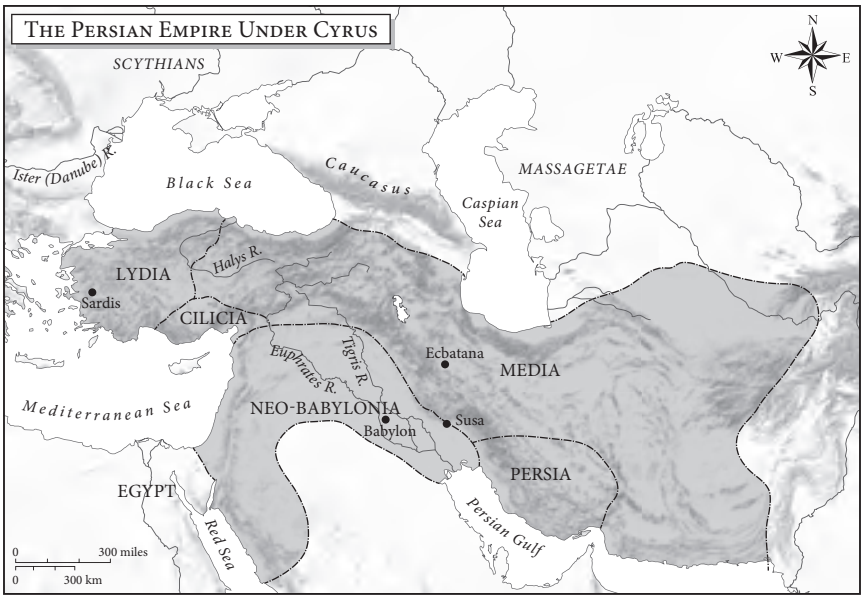
69 This is the same phrase used in the prologue, in the story of the Snatchings of Women (1.2, compare 1.5).

# *Cyrus's Last Campaign*

This, the last of the tales of Cyrus, acts as a culminating episode in a variety of ways. As the geographical and ethnographical description in its opening chapters makes clear, the reader is now summoned to the edge of the known world, where the terrain is in part fantastic (gigantic islands in a river of uncertain identification), the neighboring tribes are semi-mythological, and the peoples are primitive, without culture, living off roots and the fruit from trees and having sex in open fields like cattle. Among these peoples are the Massagetae, whose queen's stately remarks help map them to the "noble savage" type, and whose bravery is foregrounded so as to prepare the reader for the bloodshed to come.

Several motifs should resonate with one or more patterns by now well established. The Araxes, a river which marks a critical cultural boundary (here, between civilized and uncivilized) is crossed, with all the ill omen that implies; Solon-like wisdom (here, from the savage queen!) is rejected; a divine omen is misinterpreted; a strong woman drives the events; wise advice is given (by Croesus), which seems sensible as military strategy yet leads only to further transgression—again, at a dinner! You will find others. The campaign against the Massagetae, in turn, sets up and prefigures the lengthy Scythian episode to come later on.

The episode is, then, full of the philosophical and ethical reflections we have come to expect. But there is also a deep vein both of historicity and reflection on the nature of historicity. Herodotus gives a mostly correct depiction of the geography of the Caspian Sea and its environs, hundreds of years before it was described with accuracy by anyone else in the western tradition. The precious details about the nomadic tribes are often taken as at least in part reliable, though we can hardly be sure. Yet the version here of Cyrus's last campaign is but one of several, as the narrator makes clear, and as often with history that predates written materials we have little more than Herodotus's own judgment for what is the "most plausible" account. (In this case, we know from antiquity three other accounts of Cyrus's last campaign, all Greek, and they vary in matters as basic as who Cyrus's enemy was.) We are, then, at the far edge of what oral traditions can preserve, even of major life events for a major figure like Cyrus the Great. Implicit in all this remains, then, an important methodological question: for such distant events, what sort of history can or *should* one construct, and with what sort of profit to the larger enterprise?




**MAP 1.12**

## The Land of the Massagetae

Once Cyrus had conquered the Babylonians, his next desire was to put the Massagetae under his sway. The Massagetae are said to be numerous and brave, a people that lives to the East where the sun rises, beyond the river Araxes and next to the Issedones.[70] Some also claim that the Massagetae are a Scythian people. 1.201

The Araxes is said by some to be bigger than the Ister, by others to be smaller, and, they say, it is full of islands the size of Lesbos.[71] Several things are reported about the men who live on these islands. In the summertime they eat roots of all sorts dug from the ground, but store all the fruit they find ripe on the trees, so that they will have that to eat in the winter. These men have also discovered certain plants that bear a remarkable kind of harvest. Bands of men come together and sit in a circle around a fire, and throw the fruits of this plant onto the flames. As it smolders, the men sniff and become intoxicated on the fumes, just as Greeks do when they drink wine. As more is thrown on the fire, they get even more intoxicated, and eventually 1.202

70 The Issedones are a semi-mythical tribe often paired with the mythical Hyperboreans (literally, the Beyond-the-North-Wind people). As we shall see, adjacent to this tribe live the (fully mythical) tribe of one-eyed men.

71 A fantastic claim. Lesbos is a very large island in the Aegean Sea, over 630 square miles (1600 km$^2$) with 200 miles (320 km) of coastline. The Araxes itself is not firmly identified; scholars think that characteristics of perhaps as many as three rivers are conflated in the description he gives here and in book 4.

they stand up to dance and break into song.[72] Such, they say, is the islanders' way of life. In any case, this river, the Araxes, flows from the land of the Matieni, which is also the source of the Gyndes, the river that Cyrus divided into three hundred and sixty channels on his way to Babylon.[73] The Araxes disgorges into forty mouths, all but one of which, however, give way to swamps and marshes, and, they say, men there eat raw fish and regularly wear sealskins as clothing. The one clear and open mouth flows out to the Caspian Sea.

The Caspian is a sea unto itself, not connecting with any other sea. The Mediterranean—the one the Greeks navigate—and the sea beyond the pillars of Hercules called the Atlantic, and the Indian Ocean[74] are really one and
1.203 the same. The Caspian, however, is a second, distinct body of water. Its length takes fifteen days to traverse using oars, and the width, at the place where it is widest, is an eight-day voyage. Along the western side of the sea stretches the Caucasus, the longest and tallest of any mountain range. A wide variety of peoples inhabit the Caucasus, and most live entirely off the wild forest. It is said that they have trees with leaves of a special kind that, once crushed and mixed with water, are used to paint animal figures on their clothing. The animal figures do not wash out, but age with the rest of the fabric just as if they were woven in from the start. It is also said that these peoples have sex out in the open just like cattle.

1.204 The Caucasus hems in the part of the Caspian Sea to the west, but toward the east and the rising sun arises a great plain without bound as far as the eye can see. A very large part of this plain belongs to the Massagetae, that people that Cyrus was eager to march against. Many were the considerations that stirred up Cyrus and urged him on. Foremost among them was the manner of his coming to be, which seemed something more than that of a mere mortal; and, besides, there was the good luck that accompanied his military campaigns—it had proved impossible for any nation to escape, once Cyrus directed his army against it.

## Cyrus attacks the Massagetae

1.205 The Massagetae had a queen as their ruler, the wife of the dead king, a woman named Tomyris. Through a messenger Cyrus tried to woo her, pretending that he wanted her as his wife; but Tomyris saw that Cyrus was pursuing not

72 The plant is probably a kind of Indian hemp, from which hashish is made.

73 On his way to Babylon, Cyrus lost a favorite horse as they were fording the river Gyndes; in his fury, the king "punished" the river by splitting it into 360 small channels, aiming "to make it so weak that in the future even a woman can cross easily, without so much as getting her knees wet" (1.189, not included in the selections here).

74 Herodotus uses the name *Red Sea*, which can mean the modern Red Sea, Persian Gulf, or, as here, the sea to the south more generally. Herodotus was an exception in recognizing the Caspian as a landlocked sea; up to the Roman era, other Greek historians and geographers assumed it had a connection to the Indian Ocean. It is also remarkable that he knows that the Atlantic and Indian Oceans connect.

her but her kingdom, and so refused his proposal.[75] Cyrus then—since he was not getting anywhere by trickery—marched to the Araxes and openly prepared to make war on the Massagetae, working to bridge the river for the army's crossing and constructing upper works on the ships to be used as pontoons.

1.206 As Cyrus was working on this, Tomyris sent a messenger to say, "King of the Medes, why such haste, why so eager? You cannot know whether the end will turn out well for you. So, stop: rule over your own people, and be content to see us ruling over ours. Now of course you will not accept this advice—the last thing you wish is to be at peace. If, then, you are so very eager to try your chances with the Massagetae, come, leave off the hard work of bridging the river. We will withdraw from the river for a three days' march, and you can then cross over into our territory. Or, if you prefer, you withdraw to the same distance, and let us meet in your own."

When Cyrus heard the queen's message, he called together the leading Persians, and, once they were gathered, he set the issue before them, asking for advice as to which route to take. Their inclination was one and the same: they advised Cyrus to admit Tomyris and her army into their own territory.

1.207 But Croesus the Lydian was present and he criticized this advice, making quite a different argument. "King," he said, "I said long ago, when Zeus handed me over to you, that I would do whatever I can to turn aside any danger destined for your house. I have learned from my suffering, unpleasant though that be.[76] If you think that you are immortal and that you command an army that is also immortal, there would be no reason for me to make my opinions known. But if you know that you are human[77] and that you rule over others who are human too, learn this first and foremost: there is a cycle of human affairs, like a wheel, and as it revolves it does not allow the same people always to prosper. And so I have advice opposite to what these men have proposed. If we are willing to admit the enemy into our territory, this is the danger you face: if you lose the battle, you will lose your entire kingdom. Clearly the Massagetae, if victorious, will not run back but will march upon your dominions. If, on the other hand, you are victorious, you will not gain nearly so much as if you had crossed over into their territory, beaten them, and then were hunting them down as they fled. This follows the same logic as before: if you conquer the enemy you will march directly upon the dominions of Tomyris. Also, apart from this argument, it is a shameful, intolerable thing for Cyrus, the son of Cambyses, to give way

75 Just as Gyges by marrying the wife of Candaules was able to "inherit" the kingdom of Lydia, so Cyrus assumes that through marriage he could co-opt the territory as their new king.

76 This echoes Aeschylus's early encapsulation of the tragic paradox, that humans "learn through suffering" (*Agamemnon*, line 176).

77 Compare the famous inscription on the temple of Apollo at Delphi, "know thyself," for which the traditional understanding was not self-awareness in the modern sense but "know that you are a mortal with mortal limitations—and not a god."

to a woman and withdraw from his own territory. My advice, then, is to cross the river and march forward as far as they pull back and to try to prevail over them there. Now the Massagetae, I have discovered, know nothing of Persian luxury and have never experienced the finer things of life. So let's do this: slaughter many animals from the flocks and herds, in abundance, dress the meat, and set it out as a feast; and add to that large bowls of wine, abundant and strong, and other foods of every kind. Once that is done, leave the weakest part of the army behind and take the rest back to the river. Unless I am mistaken, the Massagetae, when they see the luxury before them, will indulge in it, and at that point what is left for us is to attack and reap the glory of great and mighty deeds."

1.208 Such were the conflicting opinions, and Cyrus abandoned his earlier decision, adopting the view of Croesus. He told Tomyris to withdraw while he made the crossing into her territory, and, as promised, she withdrew. Cyrus then handed over Croesus to his own son Cambyses, and proposed to hand the royal power to Cambyses as well, telling him again and again to honor Croesus and to treat him with kindness if the crossing into the land of the Massagetae did not go well. With this behest, Cyrus sent the two back to Persia. He then crossed over the river, his army with him.

1.209 After he had crossed the Araxes, when night fell and he was asleep, Cyrus had this vision in the land of the Massagetae: there appeared in his sleep the eldest of the sons of Hystaspes, with wings on his shoulders, and one wing cast its shadow over Asia and the other over Europe. Hystaspes was the son of Arsames, an Achaemenid, and his eldest son was Darius, a boy roughly twenty years old who had been left behind in Persia, not yet old enough to be part of the army. When Cyrus woke up, he reflected on the vision. He thought the vision was important, so he summoned Hystaspes and, taking him aside, said, "Hystaspes, your son has plotted against me and is trying to take over my kingdom. And I can explain how I know this so unerringly: the gods look after me and give me a sign of all impending troubles, and, in the night just passed, I saw in my sleep your eldest son with wings on his

**FIGURE 1.7 From the palace of Cyrus at Pasargadae. Such winged figures were part of Persian royal iconography**

shoulders, and one wing cast its shadow over Asia and the other over Europe. Given this dream, it has to be that he is plotting against me. So travel back to Persia as quickly as you can and see to it that—after I have conquered these peoples and return there—you bring your son before me for interrogation."

1.210 Cyrus said this because he thought Darius was plotting against him. But in fact the god was revealing that Cyrus was destined to die here, in this land, and that his kingdom would be passed down to Darius. Hystaspes replied, "King, may no man born Persian plot against you, but if there is such a man, may he perish at once. You are the one who has made the Persians free men instead of slaves, and men who rule instead of men ruled by others. If a dream vision declares that my son is plotting a revolt, I surrender him for you to do with him what you will." Hystaspes replied in this way, crossed the Araxes, and went back to Persia to keep guard over his son Darius on behalf of Cyrus.

1.211 Cyrus advanced his army one day's march from the Araxes and did as Croesus had suggested, after which he marched back to the river with the healthy part of the army, leaving behind those who could not fight. A third of the Massagetae force then fell upon them, slaughtering the soldiers Cyrus had left behind, overwhelming all resistance, a complete victory. But then the Massagetae noticed the food spread out before them. So, they lay down on the couches to feast, stuffing themselves with food and wine, and fell asleep—right as the main Persian force struck. The Persians slaughtered many and took many more alive, among them the son of Queen Tomyris, who had led the Massagetae as general. His name was Spargapises.

1.212 When Tomyris learned what had happened to her army and to her son, she sent a messenger to Cyrus to say: "Insatiate of blood, Cyrus, do not exult in what has come to pass, that with the fruit of the vine—a fruit that makes you go mad as you engorge yourselves, spilling out ugly words once the wine fills up your belly—that with this drug, and not by fighting in test of strength, you tricked and overmastered my child. I offer you this advice. Take it. Give my son back to me and depart from this land, unpunished, even though you have committed this outrage[78] on a third of the army of the Massagetae. If you do not do this, I swear by the Sun, my god and master, I will glut you with blood, however insatiate of blood you be."

1.213 Such were the words the herald proclaimed, but Cyrus paid them no attention. Then Spargapises, the son of Queen Tomyris—once the wine had worn off and he grasped what a fix he was in—asked Cyrus to release him from his chains. And, as soon as he was released and his hands were freed, he killed himself.

1.214 That, then, was how her son died. Tomyris, however—since Cyrus had not listened to her—gathered together her whole force and attacked. In my judgment, this was the fiercest of all the battles ever fought between

78 The Greek verb used here derives from *hubris*.

barbarian peoples. The battle, as I have found out, went like this: first, they stood apart and shot arrows at each other; next, when the arrows were used up, they fought hand to hand with spears and daggers. For a long time the fighters battled and neither side was willing to give way and run, but in the end the Massagetae prevailed. Most of the Persian army was destroyed where it stood, and among them was Cyrus himself. He had ruled for twenty-nine years.

Filling a wine sack with human blood, Tomyris looked among the Persian dead for the corpse of Cyrus, and when she found it, she pushed his head down into the sack. Befouling the corpse in this way, Tomyris said, "Though I am alive and have beaten you in battle, you have destroyed me by taking the life of my child, using a trick. You I glut with blood, just as I threatened." There are many stories told of the end of Cyrus's life, but this in my view is the most plausible.

## The Marvels and Customs of the Massagetae

1.215 The Massagetae are very like the Scythians in the clothing they wear and in their way of life. The warriors, however, are both with and without horse (that is, there is infantry as well as cavalry), and they have spearmen as well as archers, along with some who regularly use battle-axes. They use gold and bronze for everything. Spear-points and arrowheads and the blades of battle-axes are made entirely out of bronze, while helmets and war-belts and chest-bands are decorated with gold. So likewise the breastplates of horses are made of bronze, but the metal parts of the bridle and the bit and the cheek-pieces are of gold. Iron and silver are not used for the simple reason that those metals aren't found there—while gold and bronze are plentiful.

1.216 They have the following special customs. Each man marries a woman, but they enjoy the women in common. (Some Greeks say the Scythians do this, but the ones who do this are not Scythians but the Massagetae.) When a man of the Massagetae feels desire for a woman, he hangs his quiver on the front of her covered wagon, and they have sex without fear of jealousy or retaliation. The Massagetae have no predetermined limit to their life span, but when a man is very old all the relatives come together and sacrifice that person, together with some sheep or cattle, and, boiling the meat, they have a feast. This is considered the happiest way to end one's life. Anyone who dies from sickness is not eaten but buried, and they think it a misfortune that he cannot be sacrificed. They do not sow crops, but live from domestic animals and from the fish that spawn in abundance in the Araxes River. They are milk drinkers. As for the gods, they worship only the Sun, and to him they sacrifice horses, with this as their reasoning: to the swiftest of the gods the swiftest of mortal creatures must be apportioned.