CHAPTER 1

Proskýnesis in Herodotus’s Histories

For all we know from Herodotus, the Persians practiced prostration (proskýnesis). In two instances Herodotus refers to it. Both are in Book VII (13 and 133–136) of his Histories. To understand what proskýnesis actually is, we need to consider his work.

The first episode takes place at the Persian court. At the death of the King Darius (possibly in the autumn of 486 BC) his son Xerxes, who had been appointed regent when Darius was preparing the expedition against rebellious Egypt and against the Athenians, ascends to the throne of Persia.\(^1\) After his father’s defeat, Xerxes takes on the mission of reasserting Persian rule over Egypt and subduing the Athenians. Mardonius, Xerxes’s cousin, tries to convince the king that, once restored to power in Egypt, it will be necessary for him to move against the Greeks. In effect, immediately after reconquering Egypt, “being about to take in hand the expedition against Athens, he called together an assembly of the noblest Persians to learn their opinions, and to lay before them his own designs” (vii, 8). Xerxes expresses his intention of waging war against Athens to the assembly of nobles and officials. He explains his plan to the assembly, and he does so by referring to his predecessors Cyrus and Cambyses and to his father Darius, with whom he wishes to compete in glory. His project is to punish the Athenians for what they did in Sardis – “they burnt its temples and its sacred groves” – and for “what they did to us when we landed on their coasts”\(^2\) (vii, 8). The Athenians need to be punished because they did not willingly accept the Personal rule and because, in their

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\(^1\) The list of the Achaemenid rulers is as follows: Cyrus the Great, King of Kings, founder of the Persian Empire, 550–530 BC; Cambyses, son of Cyrus the Great, 529–522 BC; Smerdis (Bardiya), alleged son of Cyrus the Great, 522 BC; Darius I, brother-in-law of Smerdis and grandson of Arsames, 521–486 BC; Xerxes I, the son of Darius I, 485–465 BC; Artaxerxes I, son of Xerxes I, 465–424 BC; Xerxes II, son of Artaxerxes I, 424 BC; Sogdian, half-brother of Xerxes II, 424–423 BC; Darius II, brother of Xerxes II, 423–405 BC; Artaxerxes II, son of Darius II, 405–359 BC; Artaxerxes III, the son of Artaxerxes II, 358–338 BC; Artaxerxes IV (Arses), son of Artaxerxes III, 338–336 BC; Darius III, great-grandson of Darius I, 336–330 BC; Artaxerxes V, usurper 330 BC (the Darius we are talking about here is Darius I); Darius III, also known as Darius Codomannus, is instead the one defeated in 330 BC by Alexander the Great.

\(^2\) Numbers in Roman numerals refer to the book of Herodotus’ Histories, while the numbers in Arabic numerals indicate the paragraphs.
counteroffensive, having reached Sardis, “they burnt its temples and its sacred groves”. Xerxes’s, in short, are not only ideas; rather, they seem a detailed project for an expedition. We should assume, in fact, that the preparations were at an advanced stage at the time and that his were not vague ideas of conquest.

Among those called to participate in the meeting only Mardonius, already a valuable adviser, takes the floor to support the project. The others agree. Nobody utters a word. After some time, when conclusions are already been drawn on the principle of tacit approval, “Artabanus, the son of Hystaspes, and uncle of Xerxes, trusting to his relationship”, mindful of Darius’s failures and aware of the difficulties of such a deed, intervenes to dissuade Xerxes from undertaking the expedition. Xerxes’s reaction is very heated:

Artabanus, thou art my father’s brother – that shall save thee from receiving the due meed of thy silly words. One shame however I will lay upon thee, coward and faint-hearted as thou art – thou shalt not come with me to fight these Greeks, but shalt tarry here with the women. Without thy aid I will accomplish all of which I spake. For let me not be thought the child of Darius, the son of Hystaspes, the son of Arsames, the son of Ariaramnes, the son of Teispes, the son of Cyrus, the son of Cambyses, the son of Teispes, the son of Achaemenes, if I take not vengeance on the Athenians. Full well I know that, were we to remain at rest, yet would not they, but would most certainly invade our country, if at least it be right to judge from what they have already done; for, remember, it was they who fired Sardis and attacked Asia. (vii, 11)

But it does not end here. Thinking it through during the night, Xerxes takes the opposite view. He decides not to wage war against Greece. In the morning he convenes a new meeting and informs all of his decision.

“Men of Persia, forgive me if I alter the resolve to which I came so lately. Consider that I have not yet reached to the full growth of my wisdom, and that they who urge me to engage in this war leave me not to myself for a moment. When I heard the advice of Artabanus, my young blood suddenly boiled; and I spoke words against him little befitting his years: now however I confess my fault, and am resolved to follow his counsel. Understand then that I have changed my intent with respect to carrying war into Greece, and cease to trouble yourselves.” When they heard these words, the Persians were full of joy, and, falling down at the feet of Xerxes, made obeisance to him. (vii, 13; my italics)