PART TWO

WATER AND THE FORMATION OF IDENTITY AND POLICY
EARTH AND WATER: THE FOUNDATIONS OF SOVEREIGNTY IN ANCIENT THOUGHT

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Earth and water are vital to life. As a simple observation, this fact is so self-evident as to require no comment. On the other hand, when a fact of obvious significance is used as a political emblem, it assumes a new level of meaning. When Herodotus names earth and water as tokens of submission demanded by the Persians from their intended subjects,¹ these elements invite analysis from the perspective of their historical context. They appear to signify human life, especially the life and livelihood of orderly human communities dependent on agriculture, an order that the Greeks called the oikoumenē, ‘the settled [world]’.² In this historical context, these tokens are linked to a notion of sovereignty as it was claimed by Persian kings. Outside of the pages of Herodotus, however, scholars have not been able to discover a tradition, Iranian or otherwise, that explicitly identifies earth and water as tokens of submission to sovereign authority.³ Here I propose to explore the background to this political emblem, and to suggest that in demanding earth and water from the Greeks and from other peoples on the western fringe of their empire, the Persians were drawing upon traditions developed especially in Anatolia, the western bastion of their empire, where life-giving water and the nurturing earth had long been associated with the ideals of sovereignty. These Anatolian traditions were associated with deities and reflected in the cult and myth. As an emblem of submission, ‘earth and water’ is devoid of any explicit association with deities or