

Herodotus, *Histories* selections

The Capture of Babylon, Darius Disturbs the Tomb of Nitocris, Babylonian Wife Auction, Megacles' Marriage

This set-text represents four separate stories selected from Herodotus' Histories. The first three come from book 1, a book which describes the rise of Persia up to the death of Cyrus in 530BC. The three stories here all concern Babylon, a city conquered by Cyrus, as described in the first extract. The fourth story comes from book 6 and has a Greek focus, giving an insight into the marriage ties made between Greek aristocrats from different poleis in the sixth century BC.

The Capture of Babylon (1.190-1)

Cyrus was riding against Babylon. And the Babylonians, having marched out to battle, were waiting for him. And when he came riding near the city, the Babylonians joined battle and, after being defeated in the battle, they were forced into the city, where they had provisions for very many years. Then, they considered the siege of no importance, but Cyrus (5) was caught up in difficulties. Finally, he began indeed to do as follows.

Having drawn up his army where the river flows into the city, and having drawn up others in turn behind the city, where the river goes out of the city, he ordered the army, when they saw that the channel became passable, to enter the city by this means. After drawing up and (10) instructing his men in this way indeed, he himself began to ride off with the non-combatant part of his army. And after arriving at the lake, which was a marsh, having diverted the river into it with a canal, he made the original channel passable, after the river had gone down.

After something of this sort had happened, the Persians who had been drawn up (15) for this very purpose, when the river Euphrates had gone down, roughly as far as to the middle of the thigh on a man, entered Babylon along the channel. If now the Babylonians had found out in advance or learned what was being done by Cyrus, they would have watched out for the Persians having entered the city and would have destroyed them most terribly. (20) For if they had closed all the gateways which led to the river, and had themselves gone up onto the rock-walls which had been built beside the banks of the river, they would have captured them as in a fish-trap. But as it was, unexpectedly there stood in front of them the Persians. And because of the size of the city, when those around the edges of the city (25) had been caught, those who lived in the centre of Babylon were not learning of these events, but (for there chanced to be a festival taking place) were both dancing during this time and enjoying themselves, until the point indeed when they also found out the truth.

Darius Disturbs the Tomb of Nitocris (1.187)

Nitocris, the queen of Babylon, devised a certain trick as follows (30). She commissioned a tomb for herself high up above the busiest gates of the city, on top of the very gates. And she inscribed writing on the tomb which read as follows:

‘If any of the kings of Babylon who come after me needs money, after opening the tomb (35), let him take as much money as he wishes; however, if he is not indeed in need, let him certainly not open it for any other reason: for it is not a good idea.’

This tomb was undisturbed until royal power passed to Darius. But to Darius it seemed to be a terrible thing both to make no use of these gates and, while the money was lying there and the very (40) money was inviting him, not to take it. (He made no use of these gates for the following reason, namely because, as he rode out through them, the corpse would be above his head.) Having opened the tomb, he found not money, but the corpse, and writing which read as follows:

‘If you were not both insatiable for money and avaricious (45), you would not be opening the tombs of dead bodies.’

Babylonian Wife Auction (1.196)

In each village once a year the following used to be done. Whenever the unmarried girls became ready for marriage, so that they might gather them, they used to bring them all together into one place; and around them stood a crowd of men, and a herald, standing each girl up one by one used to sell (50) the best-looking first of all; and then, when this one had been sold after fetching a lot of gold, he used to offer for auction another who was the best-looking after that one: and they were being sold for marriage. All those of the Babylonians indeed who were rich and ready to marry, these men used to buy the most beautiful girls by outbidding each other (55); but all those of the common people who were ready to marry, not requiring good looks, used to gain both money and less attractive girls. For whenever indeed the herald had finished selling the best-looking of the unmarried girls, he would stand up the most unattractive or a disabled girl, and offer her for auction; and whoever wished to take the least gold and live with her, (60) to this man the unmarried girl was assigned. And in this way the good-looking girls used to pay the dowry for the unattractive and disabled ones. But it was not possible for each man to give away his own daughter to whoever he wanted.

Megacles’ Marriage (6.126-30)

Cleisthenes, the tyrant of Sicyon, had a daughter whose name was Agariste. He wanted, after discovering the best of absolutely all the Greeks (65), to give her to him as a wife. Therefore, while the Olympic Games were taking place, victorious in the four-horse chariot race in them, he had this announcement made:

‘Whoever of the Greeks thinks himself worthy to be the son-in-law of Cleisthenes, let him come to Sicyon, as Cleisthenes will decide on (70) the marriage within a year.’

Then all those of the Greeks who took pride both in themselves and in their homeland began to come as suitors: and from Athens arrived both Megacles, the son of the Alcmaeon who had

paid a visit to Croesus, and Hippocleides, the son of Tisander, who surpassed the other Athenians in wealth and looks (75). When these had arrived, Cleisthenes first enquired about both their homelands and the family of each; but afterwards keeping them for a year he kept testing out their courage and nature, and their education and character; and at the same time he was entertaining them magnificently (80).

And indeed I suppose, those who had arrived from Athens were most pleasing of the suitors; and of these Hippocleides, the son of Tisander, more. And when the appointed day came for the celebration-feast of the marriage, after sacrificing a hundred oxen, Cleisthenes was lavishly entertaining both the suitors themselves and all the Sicyonians (85).

But when they had dined, the suitors had an argument about music; and as the drinking went on, Hippocleides, outdoing the others by far, ordered the piper to play a dance-tune for him and, when the piper obeyed, he danced.

And I suppose he was dancing in a pleasing way for himself; but Cleisthenes, seeing (90) the whole affair, was viewing it with suspicion. But then Hippocleides ordered someone to bring in a table, and after the table had come in, first he danced on it some Spartan and Attic dance moves, but then, having rested his head on the table, he threw some shapes with his legs (95).

But Cleisthenes, at first when Hippocleides was dancing, although hating the thought that he would become his son-in-law because of both his dancing and his shamelessness, was restraining himself, not wanting to burst with rage at him; but when he saw that he had thrown shapes with his legs, no longer able to restrain himself he said, 'Son of Tisander, you have certainly indeed danced away (100) your marriage.' And Hippocleides said in reply, 'Hippocleides doesn't care.'

And Cleisthenes, having obtained silence, said the following for all to hear, 'Gentlemen, suitors of my daughter, I both congratulate all of you, and I would like to please all of you, if it were possible, by neither picking one (105) of you as outstanding, nor rejecting the rest. But, since I am not able, while making a decision about one unmarried girl, to act towards you all in accordance with my wishes, to those of you who are being rejected from this marriage I am giving each of you a talent of silver as a gift, but to Megacles, the son of Alcmaeon, I betroth my daughter Agariste.