

Jacob Wahbeh

Professor Shayegan

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Contrasting Views of Cambyses II in Egypt

By the time Cambyses II began his reign, he had inherited an immense amount of territory, unheard of before this time. On top of that, the land was newly acquired with people of varying cultures, so the king had a great task to continue what Cyrus the Great started. One of his first acts was exactly what his father would have done: conquer Egypt. Though the conquest was a remarkable success in the eyes of the Persians, it brought along countless challenges to the early king. From upholding Egyptian traditions to balancing a large addition to the Persian empire, Cambyses dealt with a lot of pressure. In this essay, I will be analyzing the primary sources of Herodotus' *The Histories* and the Inscription of Udjahorresnet to better understand Cambyses' rule in Egypt. Each offers a contrasting viewpoint; where Herodotus depicts the king as a mad despot who has little respect for tradition and human life, while Udjahorresnet portrays him as a very honorable man that sees the sacred value of religion.

Herodotus was a Greek writer, often attributed as the 'Father of History' for his work *The Histories*. Many acclaims that his narratives have a bias and may be less reliable. However, for early history, he recounts significant stories that would most definitely be lost if it not for him. His life's work allowed him to travel across the Mediterranean, documenting his observations and questioning sources. For us, this means that Herodotus was able to communicate to the Egyptians directly and discover what had partaken. He was born forty years after the conquest of Egypt by the Persians, which may explain his contrasting viewpoints to many of the other

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sources we have from the time. The Greeks and Persians were at war for most of Herodotus' life which may have influences his narratives on the Achaemenid King's.

In *The Histories*, Herodotus depicts Cambyses II as a mad ruler with no regard to Egyptian culture. Cambyses commits an offence against the Pharaoh's tomb, as the author states, "He ordered Amasis' corpse to be taken out of its grave. When that had been done, he ordered his men to whip it, pull its hair out and stab it, and generally to insult it in various ways" (Herodotus III, 16). Defiling any body is considered atrocious, but to do this to the late pharaoh is a whole other crime. Especially at the time, harming the dead was very looked down upon. Herodotus writes to the extreme, in that Cambyses men did not stop until they fully destroyed the body. He wants the readers to know the sacrilegious nature of Cambyses and the extent he will go to show his power, persuading those into disliking the Persians and their king. However, Herodotus himself explains how this event did not make sense for both the Egyptians and Persians, "In fact burning corpses is contrary to the practice of both peoples – for the Persians, they say it is quite wrong to give a man's corpse to a god; for the Egyptians, because they think fire is a living beast" (Herodotus III, 16). By stating that the Persians and Egyptians were against this horrid act, Herodotus influences both sides to be against the King of Anshan. Only a crazed man would do such a thing, considering the respect they had for the dead and ancient gods. On the other hand, the author comes across as less reliable by openly stating that both cultures prohibit acts defiling the dead. The Achaemenids were known to be very religiously tolerant and often encouraged those of diverse cultures to keep practicing their traditions. We have no other evidence that hints to Cambyses either being mad or sacrilegious, so there is another motive to Herodotus defaming the king's name. Much like his other narratives, Herodotus adds exaggeration to promote a better story, and he received most of his sources from the Egyptians

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themselves. The people must have been angered by the recent conquest and felt contempt for their new ruler, or Darius I could have spread false stories in order to make his coup more successful.

Similarly, Herodotus continues his portrayal of the mad despot with the interaction of the Apis Bull, the Egyptian's most important and highly regarded deity represented by a sacred animal. Cambyses became angry that the people were reveling to this bull and he took it as a sign of rebellion, the author illustrates, "Cambyses, now half insane, drew his dagger intending to stab the Apis in the belly, but struck his thigh. ... he ordered those whose job it was to flog the priests, and to kill any other Egyptians found merrymaking. The Apis expired on the floor of the shrine" (Herodotus III, 27). In this passage, Herodotus openly states that Cambyses is going insane, persisting the slander of the king's reputation. The Apis is the most revered being in Egyptian culture, and to willingly stab it shows how disrespectful the king is. Again however, this makes little sense in historical context. Cambyses had already conquered Egypt and his motives are not to convert anyone to the Persian religion, so why would he take offense to the people worshipping their God? On top of this, he mocks the priests, "You miserable lot, is that what your gods are – of blood and flesh and not resistant to iron? Such a god is surely worthy of the Egyptians! However, you shall not rejoice in my ridicule" (Herodotus 3, 27). In this quote, the king exclaims that their god is as weak as the people of Egypt, so there would be no reason to continuously punish a conquered population. Additionally, it is quite difficult to understand how worshippers could be mistaken as opposing the king or causing a rebellion. Again, the Persians have numerous sources of them being tolerant of other cultures and we also have archaeological evidence that the Apis sarcophagus was in good condition. Herodotus persuades his audience by explaining horrid acts that you would have no other choice but to hate this person. Also being

Greek, the author must have had a slightly negative view of the Persians considering the two were constantly at war with each other. His perspective on the conquest of Egypt was the opposite as one Egyptian high official.

Unlike the Greek historian, Udjahorresnet was the commander of ships before the Achaemenid empire came to Egypt. Afterwards, he became part of the royal court and chief physician alongside Cambyses II due to his collaboration during the conquest. The primary source is a statue of him with hieroglyphic text inscribed all about it, and we have it today because it is preserved in the Vatican Museum. It shows a man carrying a small shrine with the underworld god Osiris. The text describes the biography of Udjahorresnet, telling the acts and deeds he had done in his life, many involving Cambyses II. Most of what he says about the king is in positive regard, but that may be biased for his defection.

The Egyptian physician often explains how he taught the Persian king about the sanctity of their culture and Cambyses II understood and acted appropriately. Unhappy with foreigners residing in their sacred temple, Udjahorresnet asks the king to move them: "Then his majesty commanded to expel all the foreigners who dwelt in the temple of Neith, to tear down their houses and their entire refuse which was in the temple ... His majesty commanded to purify the temple of Neith and to restore to it all its people" (Udjahorresnet, 5). The King of Anshan understood how his men did not belong in the temple and that it was disgracing the Egyptian god for using it as a dwelling. Not only did he remove his men, but Cambyses restored the temple and encouraged the locals to continue their festivals and traditions, showing religious tolerance similar to his father. This very act is extremely contradictory to the way Herodotus describes the 'mad despot', slaughtering worshipping and bulls. The Egyptian commander wants to keep a good image of the new king because he believed that the conquest would be good for his

homeland. Further, Cambyses took part in these holy acts of Neith himself, as the author describes, “His majesty betook himself to the temple of Neith. He touched the ground before her very great majesty as every king had done. He organized a great feast ... His majesty completed all that is useful in the temple of Neith” (Udjahorresnet, 6). The king wanted the people to accept and like him, because a harmonious civilization is better than a rebellious province. By completing the rituals and traditions himself, Cambyses understands the importance of their practice and sees value in it himself. On top of that, he organized a feast so that the community could come together and appreciate their re-purified temple and new king. Udjahorresnet spoke very highly of the Persian king and claimed that he improved their conditions.

The Greek historian Herodotus and the Egyptians physician Udjahorresnet both told contradictory perspectives about the Persian king Cambyses II following the conquest of Egypt. Herodotus persuades his readers into thinking the king became an insane ruler who had no tolerance of the Egyptian culture, killing their holy animal and defiling the late pharaoh. Seemingly less reliable from his exaggerated plots, Herodotus most likely wrote this narrative either due to meddling from Darius I and his coup, or the Egyptian sources were highly opposed to the Persian conquest. On the other hand, Udjahorresnet provides many counter examples of how the King of Anshan kept the traditions of Egypt, such as removing his men from the temple of Neith and completing the ritual for new kings. Although the royal physician may be considered a traitor for his defection in the conquest, his words are more reliable because of the history and nature of the Achaemenids. They have always been religiously tolerant and encourage the locals to continue their practices. Additionally, we have further archaeological evidence that shows the temples were kept in good condition and the sarcophagus of the Apis bull was not damaged. Although contrary to each other, Udjahorresnet and Herodotus both use

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the power of religion to influence their audience. We get a better understanding of the society at the time and the immense role beliefs played in it.

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