

Athenian.<sup>a</sup> He had made laws for the Athenians at their request and then went abroad for ten years. He did have the excuse of wanting to do some sightseeing, but he really did it so that he could not be forced to repeal any of the laws he had made. [2] The Athenians could not do such a thing on their own because they had taken a solemn oath to abide for a period of ten years by whatever laws Solon would make.

For this reason, as well as for sightseeing, Solon went abroad and visited the court of Amasis in Egypt<sup>a</sup> and also the court of Croesus at Sardis.<sup>b</sup> When he arrived there, he was entertained as a guest by Croesus in the palace. Then, on the third or fourth day, Croesus gave orders to his servants to give Solon a tour through the treasures and to point out all his great riches. [2] When Solon had viewed and inspected everything long enough, Croesus said to him, "My Athenian guest, word of your wisdom and travels has reached us even here. We hear you have wandered through much of the world in the search for knowledge, so I really can't resist asking you now whether you have yet seen anyone who surpasses all others in happiness and prosperity?" [3] He asked this in the hope that he would be declared the happiest and most prosperous of all, but Solon had no intention of flattering him. He spoke the plain truth. "Sire, that would be Tellus the Athenian." Croesus was amazed and questioned him sharply. "Why do you choose Tellus?" [4] Solon replied, "For one thing, he lived in a famous city and had good and noble children, and he saw all his children and grandchildren surviving him. Besides, he was well off, at least by our standards of living, and he ended his life in the greatest glory, [5] for he came to the aid of the Athenians in a battle against their neighbors in Eleusis<sup>a</sup> and forced them to flee before he died most nobly on the battlefield. The Athenians buried him at public expense in the very place he fell and gave him great honors."

As Solon spoke at length about Tellus' happiness and prosperity, he spurred Croesus to ask further who might be the next most happy man. Croesus was altogether certain he would win at least second place. But Solon said, "Cleobis and Biton. [2] These were Argives<sup>a</sup> who had enough resources to live on and in addition were physically fit, as is shown by the fact that they both won prizes at athletic contests, as well as by this story told about them.

1.30

SARDIS

Croesus asks Solon who is the most fortunate of men. Solon responds that Tellus the Athenian is most fortunate.

1.31

SARDIS

Provoked, Croesus asks Solon who is the next most fortunate, and Solon replies, Cleobis and Biton.

1.29.1a Solon: another of the seven proverbial wise men of ancient Hellas. He was archon of Athens in 594–3. Some of his writings have survived to this day. This meeting between him and Croesus is certainly fictional, for Solon must have been dead many years before Croesus became king of Lydia in 560. For a review of his reforms at Athens, see Appendix A, The Athenian Government in Herodotus, §2–6. Athens: Map 1.24.

1.30.1a Egypt: Map 1.28, locator: Amasis, pharaoh 570–526. Herodotus has much more to say about Amasis in Books 2 and 3.

1.30.1b Sardis: Map 1.28, BX.

1.30.5a Eleusis: Map 1.24. Just who these neighbors were is moot. Some scholars think they were the Eleusinians, others believe they were Megarans; both at different times could be called "neighbors" to Athens.

1.31.2a Argos: Map 1.24.

"The Argives were having a festival for Hera,<sup>b</sup> and their mother had to be taken to the shrine in a wagon, but the oxen were not back from the fields in time to pull it. With time running out, the young men put themselves under the yoke and themselves hauled the wagon, with their mother riding in it, for five miles,<sup>c</sup> until they brought her all the way to the sanctuary. [3] Everyone who had gathered there for the festival watched them perform this feat; and then the god granted the young men the best possible departure from this life, showing clearly that it is better for a human being to be dead than to be alive.

"The Argive men crowded around them and showered praises on their strength, while the Argive women commended their mother for being blessed with such good sons. [4] Their mother was simply elated by her sons' feat and by all the praise. She stood before the statue of the goddess and said a prayer for Cleobis and Biton: that since they had shown her such great honor, let the goddess grant to them the best thing a human being could have. [5] After the prayer, they all sacrificed and had their feast. Then the young men fell asleep in that very sanctuary and never awoke again; this was the end of their lives. The Argives made statues of them and dedicated them at Delphi<sup>a</sup> to commemorate that they had proven themselves to be the best of men."

## 1.32

## SARDIS

Vexed, Croesus asks why Solon despises him. Solon points out that no one can be judged fortunate until he is dead.

When Solon thus allotted his second place for happiness to these, Croesus now became annoyed. "My Athenian guest," he said, "are you disparaging my own happiness as though it were nothing? Do you think me worth less than even a common man?" Solon replied, "Croesus, you asked me about human concerns, and I know that the gods are jealous of human prosperity and disruptive of our peace. [2] Over a long period of time, a man will see and experience many things he would rather not. If we set the limit of a human life at seventy years, [3] these seventy cycles of seasons provide 25,200 days, without the intercalary months.<sup>a</sup> But if you want to make every other year a month longer so that the seasons occur at the proper time, add thirty-five intercalary months to the seventy years, and from these months you get 1,050 days. [4] All these days in the seventy years add up to 26,250, and any one of these days brings with it something completely unlike any other. And so, Croesus, human life is pure chance. [5] You seem to be very wealthy, and you rule over many people, but I cannot yet tell you the answer you asked for until I learn how you have ended your life. You see, the man who is very wealthy is no more happy and prosperous than the man who has only enough to live from day to day, unless good fortune stays with him and he retains his fair and noble possessions right up until he departs this life happily. For many wealthy people are unhappy, while many others who have more modest resources

1.31.2b Hera, goddess consort of Zeus. See Figure 1.31, showing the remaining foundations of the temple of Hera in Argive territory.

1.31.2c Herodotus writes "45 stades" here. See Appendix J, §6, 19.

1.31.5a Delphi: Map 1.24.

1.32.3a The "intercalary" month is a month periodically inserted to make the series of solar and calendar years eventually correspond. But Herodotus' reckoning here would make the average length of a year 375 days. (Godley)



FIGURE 1.31. FOUNDATION REMAINS OF THE TEMPLE OF HERA IN THE ARGOLID.

are fortunate. [6] The man who has great wealth but is unhappy outdoes the fortunate man in only two ways, while the fortunate man outdoes him in many ways. The former is more capable of gratifying his passions and of sustaining himself in adversity, but the fortunate man, although he does not have the same ability to sustain himself in adversity or passion, avoids these anyway by virtue of his good fortune. Moreover, he has no injury, no sickness, no painful experiences; what he does have is good children and good looks. [7] Now if, in addition to all these things, he ends his life well, too, then this is the man you are looking for; he alone deserves to be called happy and prosperous. But before he dies, refrain from calling him this—one should rather call him lucky.

[8] "Of course, it is impossible for one human being to receive all these blessings together, just as no one country can produce everything it needs by itself. What one has, the other lacks, and the one that has the most is the best. So, too, no one man can be self-sufficient either; he surely lacks something. [9] But the man who goes through life having the most blessings and then ends his life favorably, he is the man, sire, who rightly wins this title from me. We must look to the end of every matter to see how it will turn out. God shows many people a hint of happiness and prosperity, only to destroy them utterly later."

1.33

SARDIS

Croesus is displeased.

Solon did not please Croesus at all by telling him this, and Croesus dismissed him, thinking him worthless and extremely ignorant for overlooking the good things right before his eyes and telling him instead to look to the end of every matter.

1.34

SARDIS

Croesus tries to protect his son Atys from a death he foresaw in a dream.

But after Solon left, the god took a dreadful vengeance upon Croesus, apparently because Croesus had thought himself the happiest and most prosperous of men. Not long afterward, he had a terrible dream that accurately showed him the troubles about to descend upon his son. [2] Now Croesus had two sons, one disabled by muteness, the other, named Atys, who greatly surpassed his peers in everything. It was Atys that Croesus dreamed he would lose after he had been wounded by an iron spear.<sup>1</sup>

[3] When Croesus awoke he pondered the dream and became more and more apprehensive about it; he quickly found a wife for Atys, and although the young man had served as a general in the Lydian army before this, Croesus no longer permitted him to have anything to do with war. Further, he moved all the javelins, lances, and everything else men use in warfare from the men's hall into the bedrooms so that they could not hang above his son and perhaps fall upon him.

1.35

SARDIS

Adrastos arrives as a suppliant to the court of Croesus.

Just when his son was becoming occupied with his marriage, there arrived in Sardis a man caught up in bad luck, with blood guilt on his hands. He was a Phrygian of royal birth and came to Croesus' household in accordance with the local custom; he needed to obtain ritual purification because of his crime. And so Croesus performed this service for him. [2] The Lydian method of purification is similar to that of the Hellenes.<sup>2</sup> After Croesus had performed the customary rites, he asked who he was and where he was from in these words: [3] "Now, you, who are you? And from where in Phrygia have you come here as my suppliant? What man or woman did you murder?" And the man answered, "I am the son of Gordias son of Midas; my name is Adrastos.<sup>3</sup> I killed my brother unintentionally, and am here because I was banished by my father and am now deprived of everything." [4] Croesus replied with these words: "It so happens that you

1.34.2a Significant dreams were thought to be communications from the gods warning of threats and dangers, advising on cures for illness, imposing policies, or answering pressing questions, but in 7.16.β.2, Herodotus has Artabanos give a surprisingly rational explanation for them when

he advises Xerxes and says that "most of the visions visiting our dreams tend to be what one is thinking about during the day."

1.35.2a The ritual included pouring a young pig's blood over the murderer's hands.

1.35.3a The name means "unable to escape."

1.83

546?

SPARTA

The Spartans plan to assist Croesus but learn of his fall before help can be sent.

1.84

547/46

SARDIS

How the Persians captured Sardis.

1.85

SARDIS

The story of Croesus' mute son.

ashamed to return to Sparta because his comrades had died; he killed himself there in Thyrea.

The Spartans were still occupied with this matter when the herald from Sardis arrived to ask them to assist Croesus, who was being besieged. Despite their conflict with the Argives, when they heard the news from the herald, they decided to go to his aid. Their preparations were complete, and their ships ready to sail, when another message arrived that the wall of the Lydians had been taken and Croesus was being held captive. So considering it a great disaster, they stopped the expedition.

This is how the Persians captured Croesus and Sardis.<sup>a</sup> When the fourteenth day of the siege arrived, Cyrus sent around his horsemen and proclaimed to his army that he would give a reward to the first man to scale the wall. [2] After this, the army tried to scale the walls but failed. Then, when all the rest had given up, a Mardian<sup>a</sup> named Hyrocades attempted to climb up at the part of the acropolis<sup>b</sup> where no guard had been posted, since it was so steep and apparently impenetrable there that no one had ever feared that the acropolis could be taken from there. [3] It was only at this part of the wall that Meles, an earlier king of Sardis, did not pass when he was carrying the lion borne to him by his concubine; he was following the judgment of the Telmessians,<sup>a</sup> who had determined that Sardis would be impregnable if a lion was carried around its wall. Meles carried the lion around the rest of the wall, but ignored this part because it was so steep it was thought to be impenetrable. It is on the side of the city that faces Mount Tmolus.<sup>b</sup> [4] It so happened that the day before, Hyrocades the Mardian had seen one of the Lydians climb down at this part of the acropolis and recover a helmet that had tumbled from above. Hyrocades watched him carefully and committed to memory what he saw. Then, the next day, he ascended the height at the same place with other Persians following behind. In this way, when many had made the climb, the acropolis of Sardis was taken and the whole city fell and was sacked.

What happened to Croesus himself was this. As I mentioned earlier,<sup>a</sup> he had a son who, although healthy in all other respects, was unable to speak. In the past, during peace and prosperity, Croesus had done everything for this boy and, among other things, sent a mission to Delphi<sup>b</sup> asking the oracle about him. [2] This is what the Pythia<sup>a</sup> said:

Lydian of race, king of many, Croesus, you fool,  
Desire not to hear at home that prayed-for sound,  
Of your son's voice. Much better for you to be far from that:  
The day on which you hear it first will rob you of prosperity.

1.84.1a Sardis: Map 1.92.

1.84.2a The Mardians were a Persian tribe.

1.84.2b Acropolis of Sardis, a steep, fortified hill above the town; see n. 1.15.1f and Glossary.

1.84.3a Telmessians: priests of Apollo at Telmessos in Lycia: Map 1.75, BY.

1.84.3b Mount Tmolus: Map 1.92.

1.85.1a See 1.34.2.

1.85.1b Delphi: Map 1.92.

1.85.2a Pythia, the priestess at Delphi who pronounced the oracles while in a trance. See Appendix P, §9, 12.



[3] And indeed it turned out that when the wall was being taken, one of the Persians, who did not recognize Croesus, approached the king and was going to kill him; Croesus saw him coming but did nothing; in his misery he did not care that he would die by a stroke of violence. [4] But when his mute son saw the Persian approaching, he shouted out in fear and horror, "You there! Do not kill Croesus!" These were the first words he ever spoke, and after this, he could speak for the rest of his life.

When the Persians took Sardis and captured Croesus, he had ruled fourteen years and had been under siege fourteen days. And as the oracle predicted, he put an end to a great empire—his own. The Persians seized him and led him to Cyrus, [2] and to a huge pyre that the King had had them build, and they mounted Croesus bound in shackles on top of it, and with him, fourteen Lydian boys. Cyrus did this either to consecrate them as a sacrifice of victory offerings to some god, or to fulfill a vow, or perhaps, having found out that Croesus was god-fearing, he wanted to see if some divinity would save him from being burned alive. [3] As Croesus stood there on the pyre, despite the horror of his predicament, he thought of Solon and how divinely inspired he had been when he stated his maxim that no living human can be called truly happy and prosperous. Until then he had remained quiet, but when this occurred to him, he sighed deeply and groaned and repeated aloud "Solon," three times. [4] Cyrus heard this and ordered his interpreters to ask Croesus who was this man he had called by name. Croesus kept silent at first, but when they pressed him to answer, he said, "A man to whom I would pay a fortune if only he could talk to all tyrants."<sup>1</sup> Since his words were obscure to them, they questioned him again, asking what he meant, [5] and they continued to pester him until he told them what had happened when Solon the Athenian had visited him; indeed he related the whole story from beginning to end, even repeating Solon's very words, of how after the Athenian had seen all of the king's prosperity, he had still made light of it and refused to call Croesus a fortunate man. And now everything had turned out just as Solon had said, and indeed it was clear that his words applied no more to Croesus himself than to the whole human race, and especially to all those who consider themselves happy and prosperous. While Croesus related all this, the pyre had been lit and its edges were now burning. [6] Cyrus, after learning through the interpreters what Croesus had said, reflected that he, too, was human, and changed his mind about committing a living man to the fire, a fellow human being who had been blessed with happiness no less than he. Moreover, he began to fear retribution, and to contemplate the fact that nothing is really secure and certain for human beings. So he gave orders that the fire should be extinguished at once and that Croesus and the Lydian

1.86

SARDIS

Croesus on the pyre  
recalls the words of Solon.

1.86.4a Herodotus here uses the term *tyrannoi*, which meant to Hellenes persons who obtained power without traditional means or legitimate consent. To Easterners the term meant absolute rulers like the Persian King.

1.87

SARDIS

Croesus prays to Apollo and is saved by a sudden rainstorm. He becomes an advisor to Cyrus.

1.88

SARDIS

Croesus advises Cyrus that Sardis, which is now his city, is being plundered.

1.89

SARDIS

Croesus advises Cyrus as to how to recover the plunder and preserve his army from corruption.

youths with him on the pyre be brought down. The Persians immediately tried to carry out his orders, but they were unable to get the fire under control.

Then, say the Lydians, as Croesus watched all the men attempting but failing to put out the mounting flames, he realized that Cyrus had changed his mind, and now called out to Apollo, beseeching him that if any of his gifts had ever pleased the god, to come now to his rescue and save him from the danger at hand. [2] And as he called on the god and began to weep, clouds suddenly converged out of the clear, calm sky, and a storm burst out, and rain poured down in floods, extinguishing the fire. Cyrus understood from this that Croesus must be a good man and dear to the gods. He had him brought down from the pyre and asked him, [3] "Croesus, who on earth persuaded you to wage war against me rather than to become my friend?" Croesus replied, "Sire, what I did was a blessing for you, but a curse for me. The one to blame is the god of the Hellenes; it is he who encouraged me to go to war. [4] Otherwise, no one could be so foolish as to prefer war to peace: in peace sons bury fathers; in war fathers bury sons. Surely this all happened by divine will."<sup>a</sup>

That is what he told Cyrus, and Cyrus ordered him to be freed and sat him at his side, treating him with great respect and both Cyrus and all those nearby stared at Croesus in wonder while he sat silently in contemplation. [2] But then, when he turned and saw the Persians ransacking the Lydians' city, he said, "Sire, should I keep quiet or tell you what I am thinking right now?" Cyrus told him to have no fear and to say whatever he wanted, so Croesus asked, "What is it that that mob of your soldiers is so busily doing?" Cyrus replied, "They are sacking your city and plundering your wealth." "No, sire, it is not my city," Croesus answered, "it is not my city, nor my wealth any longer that they are sacking, since after this nothing here belongs to me. It is, rather, your property they are plundering and looting."

These words of Croesus' impressed Cyrus so much that he asked all those who were present to leave them alone. Then he asked Croesus what he thought Cyrus should do, in his own best interest, about the plundering. And Croesus answered, "Since the gods have given me to you as your slave, I think it only right that I speak out when I see where your advantage may lie. [2] Because the Persians are both poor and by nature rapacious, if you allow them to completely sack the city and seize all of its great wealth, this is what is likely to happen: whoever accumulates the most wealth will be most likely to rebel against you. So now, if you would act on my advice, [3] post some of your spearmen as sentries at each and every gate; have them take the plunder from the men carrying it off, and let them say that they must give a tenth part of it to Zeus. This way they will not hate you for taking things away from them by force, but will have to admit that you are acting justly, and they will willingly surrender what they have gathered."

1.87.4a The death of Croesus became a theme of legend. In addition to the version here recounted by Herodotus, Croesus was also thought to have been thrown or to

have thrown himself on a funeral pyre, but to have been saved by Apollo and taken by the god to the land of the Hyperboreans. See Figure 1.91.