FACT OR PHILOSOPHICAL MUSING?
THE CONSTITUTIONAL DEBATE IN HERODOTUS 3.80-82
Herodotus of Halicarnassus (c. 484 – c. 420 BC) in assembling his *History* inquired of various sources, both Greek and non-Greek, to ascertain and record the causes and consequences of the past. Following in the footsteps of the logographers, his predecessors and contemporaries who engaged in narrative prose to give an account of human development, he sought to engage in a venture that was investigative rather than poetic. While logographers like Hecataeus of Miletus perceived their tasks as the recounting of a mythographic or geographical depiction or an account of a local custom, Herodotus combines the various approaches and fashions the first known coherent history. Instead of recording and assessing a genealogy of a tribe or the chronological lists of a magistrate or priest, he takes on the immense task of investigating and recording the causes of the Persian Wars and the interesting history of each of its combatants. Herodotus records what he sees, hears and reads in his travels and learns via informers, seeking to accurately portray the events of the past and their consequences. Much of his work has been questioned for its accuracy and even fabrication of names and places to illustrate a story, as later Greek writers accused the logographers of doing also. Herodotus throughout his work stresses his role as a historian to investigate and record past events. When he deems necessary he inserts his judgment of an account, as to whether the person supplying the info was correct or not, yet supplying the story nonetheless. The ascension of Darius to the throne of the Great King of the Persian Empire in Book 3 of the *History* is an example of Herodotean investigation and also the controversy surrounding his writings. The Constitutional Debate particularly poses a problem for his readers, both during his time and to the present day, as an indication of either Herodotus’ fabrication of events or else his use of unreliable sources. In evaluating these
passages of the *History*, we can understand Herodotus’ method of assembling and assessing sources and his perception of the role of a historian.

In Sections 61 to 79 of Book 3, Herodotus recreates for his readers how the Magians seized control of the Persian Empire while the monarch Cambyses was absent, and the account concludes with the seven conspirators confronting and slaying the usurpers. Following this act of rebellion to restore the natural order, the conspirators, according to Herodotus in Sections 80-83, assembled with the intent of defining their objective for the future. The issue at hand for the noblemen-conspirators hinged upon a tripartite quandary: should the empire be ruled by a democracy, an oligarchy, or a monarchy? For the purposes of this paper, the primary passages I will investigate are the actual arguments for each system of government, namely Sections 80-82 of Book 3, and their believability, in light of Herodotus’ overall attempt at accuracy and modern scholars’ interpretation of his account.

The arguments and their effectiveness are as follows:

**Otanes:** As the old adage proclaims, “absolute power corrupts absolutely,” and here Otanes cites the depravity of both Cambyses and the Magians as examples of miscreant monarchs. He asserts that, because of the nonexistence of checks and balances, even the most virtuous of men would become tainted by the pollution of one-man rule. “Envy is basic in the nature of man,”¹ he determines; affected by the extravagances to which he is exposed, which lead to further lavishness until a limit is achieved, the monarch continuously desires further satiety. Yet the monarch can never be satisfied, for neither moderate admiration nor abject flattery is sufficient. The monarch’s dealings with the general public are terse and unconscionable: the

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¹ φόνος δὲ ἀρχήθη ἐμφύτευαι ἄνθρωπω
commonalty must endeavor to maintain the monarch’s happiness, while, because he is “the most incongruous of all men,” never knowing exactly what the monarch requires. His outages and wavering desires are not the essence of the argument, however: “I have still my greatest charge to make against him: he turns upside down all ancestral observances, forces women, and kills without trial.” Otanes concludes that under a democracy equality before the law and checks and balances are present. Extravagances that prevail in a monarchy are absent within a democracy. Thus, Otanes votes to abolish the monarchy and establish a democracy.

**Megabyzus:** The second conspirator to speak agrees with Otanes as concerns the evils of monarchy; however, he proceeds, a democracy is also unsuitable as the government would then be in the hands of a useless mob, of which “nothing is more void of understanding or more inclined to violence.” Ignorance compels a mob to act; despite the outrages of a monarch, at least he acts out of knowledge. Megabyzus asserts that the necessary course of action would be to institute an oligarchy consisting of the “Best Men” (in which category he places himself and the other conspirators), as they would possess the knowledge required for leading the empire, while retaining the checks and balances endorsed by Otanes.

**Darius:** The third speaker urges that both democracy and oligarchy are flawed systems of government, and he proposes that monarchy is superior among the three. The other two systems devolve into chaos, so that monarchy is necessary to return order:

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2 ἀναμισσοστότατον δὲ πάντων
3 τὰ δὲ δὴ μέγιστα ἐρχομαι ἐρέων νόμαι τέ κινεῖ πάτρια καὶ βίαται γυναίκας κτείνει τε ἀκρίτους
4 ἡμέλου γὰρ ἄχρισιον οὐδὲν ἐστι ἄξιωτότερον οὐδὲ ἀξιοστότερον
5 δὲ μὲν γὰρ εἰ τι ποιέει, γυνώσκων ποιέει
Oligarchy: citizens band together to take care of their own concerns, rather than those of the state. To preserve the interests of the state, rather than those of the elite, a single individual must attain control of the state. This shift leads to monarchy, thus showing that monarchy is the best system.\(^7\)

Democracy: among the Many, factions erupt, which leads to civil war. A single individual emerges from the fray and attains control of the state, which leads once again to monarchy. Monarchy is repeatedly shown to be the best system.\(^8\)

In both scenarios, monarchy continually rears its head, proving that out of chaos monarchy proves best for restoring order. However, Darius does not counter the points made by Otanes in the beginning, namely that the monarch is contemptuous and insatiate due to extravagances and lust for greater power. Darius perceives the flaws of rule by the few and rule by the many, but he neglects to recognize the human condition as it pertains to a single person. The checks and balances espoused by the previous speakers are absent from Darius’ argument; Darius claims that the laws of their Persian ancestors will not be transgressed, yet he proposes no means of assuring that a monarch will abolish such customs. Yet, ultimately (after presumed further debating, to which Herodotus makes no reference), the other non-speaking conspirators supported Darius’ proposition for governance.\(^9\)

\(^6\) ἄριστων δὲ ἀνδρῶν οἶκος ἀριστα βουλεύματα γίνεσθαι
\(^7\) ἐκ δὲ τοῦ φῶνος ἀπέβη ἐξ μοναρχίην, καὶ ἐν τούτῳ διέδεξε διὸ ἐστὶ τούτῳ ἀριστῶν
\(^8\) καὶ ἐν τούτῳ δηλοὶ καὶ οὕτως ὡς ἡ μοναρχίη κράτιστον
\(^9\) Hdt. 3.82
As modern readers cognizant of the vast usage of propaganda throughout history in order to convey the victor’s worthiness of supremacy, we cannot help but come to the conclusion that while Herodotus believes what he writes, he has in fact been “suckered into” a lie perpetrated by Darius. The historian emphasizes at the beginning of his explication of the debate: “Here speeches were made that some of the Greeks refuse to credit, but the speeches were made, for all that.”\(^{10}\) Herodotus is not a liar in this instance; if we believed he was deliberately lying in this case, then the validity of his entire work comes into question. He does not intentionally espouse falsities; instead, he has made an error of consulting biased sources, namely a Persian informer and inscriptions crafted by Darius himself.

Scholars for the last half century have attempted to either support or discount the possibility of Persian informers as sources of many of Herodotus’ accounts of Persian history. While Zopyrus, son of Megabyzus and a deserter to Athens, is a suitable candidate for this role, Herodotus was not limited to this likely source. Persian deserters existed throughout Greece following the Persian Wars, and Herodotus could have easily encountered one of them during his travels. Access to information, Persian or Greek, was possible and very likely. Herodotus relates the story of Demaratus, the Spartan king who fled to Persia in 6.67-70 and was welcomed by Darius. Instead of being executed, Demaratus was well received and had a prominent role in Darius’ empire. When the time came for Darius to select an heir (7.3), Demaratus supplied advice to Xerxes, assisting him in procuring the throne. Later in Book 7, Demaratus again proves useful to Xerxes by warning him of the Greeks’ resistance (7. 101-104, 209) and advising the Persian king on military strategy (7.234-237). The appearance of the Spartan king repeatedly throughout Book 7 substantiates

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\(^{10}\) Hdt. 3.80: “in spite of all objections” = δὲ ὅπως
the possibility in turn of a Persian informer recounting Persian history to Herodotus. As Zopyrus was a noble, son of Megabyzus who had been present at the debate, he is considered the most likely source of Herodotus’ writings. However, any high-ranking Persian with access to information could be Herodotus’ source, information expressed in terms understandable by his audience, a Greek. Herodotus’ references to Zopyrus deserting Persia for Athens and Demaratus deserting Sparta for Persia attest to this possibility.

Herodotus fully believes the debate to be genuine; nevertheless, A. R. Burn maintains the following: “The speeches...draw on Greek political experience, and are interesting chiefly as a Herodotean dialogue on politics; and Herodotus has come in for much ridicule for his naïveté, or accusations (to quote one) of ‘amazing mendacity’.” The implication of misinformation is apparent, and the readers of Herodotus must question the historian’s promptness to accept what he hears, without circumstantial evidence. The ability to declare the debate as relayed in Book 3 as “interesting chiefly as a Herodotean dialogue on politics” can be determined to be null and void. Herodotus truly believes, if we are to accept his declaration that “the speeches were made, for all that,” that the contents of the debate were undeniably accurate. He trusts his informer(s) explicitly and would even stand up to those Greeks who rejected the account, in order to relate what transpired following the revolt by the Seven. Whether Herodotus’ sources are reliable or not, the presence of an informer disallows speculation that Herodotus “made up” the constitutional debate to provide him a means of discussing Greek political philosophy.

This retelling is not merely a dialogue on politics, but an explanation of how Darius became king after a terrible revolution. One scholar even deigns to claim that the arguments
utilized are borrowed from a sophistic dialogue, probably from Protagoras, and that the same source was employed by Isocrates. Fortunately, another scholar rebukes this assumption by deeming it illogical that Herodotus would attempt to present the speech as historical fact since it was known to the public. Had Herodotus actually appropriated the treatise of another scholar and fabricated the debate around another’s philosophy, he would have run the risk of utterly destroying any credibility his work might have had. Again, it must be recalled that Herodotus fully supported the contents of the debate, despite the objections of his contemporaries.

Twentieth-century scholars tend either to gloss over or discount the constitutional debate; very few commentaries argue in support of the validity of this event. Charles Hignett avoids the question of Herodotus’ accuracy by stating merely, “The conspirators sought out and slew Smerdis in a castle in Media, whereupon Darius with their consent proclaimed himself king.” No reference is made to the debate, and Darius attains the role of monarch solely by the consent of his fellow revolutionaries. Another intriguing theory is that found in A. T. Olmstead’s *History of the Persian Empire*, which makes the claim that Darius was in truth a usurper who assassinated the real Bardiya, son of Cyrus, who had assumed the throne while his brother Cambyses was absent. Contrary to Herodotus’ account, Bardiya was not murdered by a servant of Cambyses, and Bardiya’s identity was not adopted by a Magian so

12 Maas, *Hermes* xxii (1894) pp. 581ff
14 Hdt. 3.80
as to overthrow the empire. Rather, Darius deceived his fellow conspirators into attacking and defeating the true Bardiya and then announced himself king.

The first biased source, the Persian informer, was discussed in depth by J. Wells, who writes: “If we assume that the historian obtained from Zopyrus [grandson of the conspirator Megabyzus and also the likely informer] the famous account of the debate of the Seven as to possible forms of government, we have at once an explanation of the curious and surprising insistency with which the historian maintains the accuracy of his version, and also of its very un-Oriental character. Modern critics rightly agree with the skeptics of Herodotus’ own day in doubting the authenticity of the speeches said then to have been delivered. Full of interest as these speeches are, they are interesting as giving us Greek political ideas of the fifth century, and not as reproducing the sentiments of Persian grandees of the sixth century.” 17 Thus, Wells proposes a Persian informer who took residence in Athens as the source for the debate, as well as the entire accession portion of Book 3. The informer could very well be Zopyrus, the grandson of the same Megabyzus who was one of the conspirators and a speaker in the debate. While this theory has come under scrutiny of late, 18 and Donald Lateiner states that “[t]he actual sources of Herodotus’ knowledge of Median and Persian life and history are impossible to identify with precision,” 19 Lateiner recognizes the possibility of Zopyrus being a source for Herodotus, and that “he may alone represent all the ‘Persian sources,’ when they are noted.” 20 While Zopyrus is certainly a possible source, Herodotus would be in error if he utilized only one Persian source, as Lateiner theorizes. Rather,

20 Ibid, pp. 101-102
multiple sources would be consulted by Herodotus to paint a broader picture of Persian history.

K. H. Waters contends that a Persian source for the debate is possible; he even reaches further than other scholars and says it is “almost certain.” He also asserts that the final paragraph of Book 3 on Zopyrus leads us to conclude that Zopyrus is a “probable” Herodotean source, and that the account is “one of the most contentious points over Herodotus’ handling of his sources.” Waters adds that the conspirators’ arguments for differing types of governments, whether democracy, monarchy, or oligarchy, were similar to discussions in Greece during Herodotus’ time. He refers to Protagoras as the source of the discourse in the form of a dialogue which put the arguments in the mouths of three non-Greeks in order to evaluate the three systems of governance. Waters posits that a sophist, if not Protagoras then someone else, published these arguments which were adopted by Herodotus and “at face value, or by a use of literary convention comparable to that which permitted him to compose these or other speeches ‘suitable to the occasion’.” Waters incorrectly assumes, as Maas asserted earlier, that Herodotus employed a dialogue of Protagoras, works certainly known to his Greek audience, as if an actual event. While Herodotus’ source for this debate may be unreliable, Herodotus would hardly have relied on a Sophistic dialogue as the basis for the account. The possibility of course exists that Herodotus’ informer(s) knew the dialogue, and Waters would have us believe that the source, likely Persian, presented it orally to Herodotus as if an actual event. However, as

21 K.H. Waters, Herodotos the Historian (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1985) p. 77: “Direct contact with high-ranking Persians through an interpreter, and occasionally perhaps with Greek-speaking Persians, is almost certain.”
22 Μεγαβζου δε τοτου γινεται Ζώπυρος, δε ες Αθήνας ητομόλησε εκ Περσέων (3.160)
23 K.H. Waters, Herodotos the Historian, p. 78
Maas erred before, Waters forgets that if the Persian source knew the dialogue, then
Herodotus and his readers would have as well. If we accept the premise that a dialogue
known by a Greek audience could be supplied to the historian and accepted as fact without
any question while the historian himself knew the original piece, then we presume
Herodotus to be a fool and we must throw out the entire work.

Lateiner refers to the theories concerning Greek influences on the Herodotean
process of historiography, including the Sophists, but concludes: “The substance of the
positions espoused by the Persian debaters and the source for the antilogies have been
thoroughly canvassed without final agreement… Herodotus had no more need here than
elsewhere to insist on the veracity of his report, yet here he uniquely emphasizes the
historicity of an event.” Lateiner states that this does not mean the event truly occurred, or
at least not in the manner Herodotus supplies; however, Herodotus believes his informer(s)
and thus does not fabricate the account. When Herodotus stated at the beginning of the
debate that “speeches were made which were unbelieved by some of the Greeks, but for all
that they were made,” he asserts without hesitation that he believes the source of the
constitutional debate. Later in the work, Herodotus relates his process for discerning reliable
from unreliable information from his sources: “I must tell what is said, but I am not at all
bound to believe it, and this comment of mine holds about my whole history.” Thus, while
Herodotus may hear an interesting story and feel inclined to include it in his “inquiry” as a
civilization’s antiquated and thus unbelievable perspective on their past, he does not have to

24 Ibid
25 Lateiner, The Historical Method of Herodotus, p. 167
26 ἐλέχθησαν λόγοι ἄπιστοι μὲν ἐνίοις Ἐλλήνωι, ἐλέχθησαν δὲ ὦν
27 ἐγὼ δὲ ὀφείλω λέγειν τὰ λεγόμενα, πείθεσθαι γε μὲν οὐ παντάπασι ὀφείλω, καὶ μοι τότε ἐς ἐχέτω ἔς πάντα λόγον (7.152)
state that he believes the story himself. In the constitutional debate, however, Herodotus recognizes that his audience may not believe the account, but that in fact the events did transpire as he was told by his sources. As Bruno Gentili and G. Cerri affirm: “Herodotus too, in setting out the results of his research (histories apodexis) always distinguishes carefully between information obtained by direct observation (opsis) and information which he has instead derived from the chronicles of others (logoi). However, in the latter case, although, as he himself states, he feels the need to report what he has learned, he does not feel obliged to believe it.”

In stating that “speeches were made which were unbelieved by some of the Greeks, but for all that they were made,” Herodotus provides his audience with the undeniable recognition that he does not question his source in this matter, and thus we can infer that the source was Persian and likely of noble rank.

Even Detlev Fehling, who established renown for his attempt to discredit Herodotus as supplying fictitious accounts and citing inaccurate or even created sources, alters his stance when discussing the debate. “So far as I can see, Herodotus has only one example of an assurance of his own truthfulness, his famous words ἐλέγχειν τῆς ᾿ Ῥῳδῆς ὁ θάνατος ὅτι ἐλαλήθη, ‘they were indeed delivered,’ at 3.80.1, referring to the speeches in the debate among the seven Persian conspirators on the best form of government. The assurance is then repeated in substance at 6.43.3.”

Fehling, who typically attempts to discredit Herodotus and refers to the historian throughout his work as a liar inclined to use false sources deliberately, attests to Herodotus’ determination that his source for the debate was reliable. The passage cited by Fehling as being a later assurance of the reality of the debate occurs in Book 6: “I will tell of a great

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thing which is a wonder to those Greeks disbelieving that Otanes had shown his opinion
among the seven that Persia should be democratically ruled.”

Herodotus knows, as he conveys at the start of the account of the debate, that the Greeks would not believe the debate truly happened. Twice he resolves to draw attention to this disbelief, in 3.80 and 6.43.

In response to Fehling’s attestations of Herodotus’ failure as a historian, W. Kendrick Pritchett counters each example point Fehling offers for point. Satisfied with Fehling’s statements regarding the constitutional debate, Pritchett offers no opinion of the debate. On the Herodotean process of accumulating data and Herodotus’ conception of his work as a historian, Pritchett refers to the statement in 7.152.3, where Herodotus uses the word ὀφείλω to show he “is bound” to tell what he learns, but that does not necessarily imply “belief” in the stories he recounts (πείθεσθαι γε μὲν οὐ παντάπασι ὀφείλω). In using the words γε μὲν οὐ παντάπασι Herodotus emphatically asserts that he is “by no means” required to believe what he is told. Pritchett further supplies the following digression from 2.123.1: “Now he that findeth such things credible may believe that which is told by the Egyptians. But as for me, it is my principle throughout all this history to write that which each nation telleth, as I heard it.”

Again, Herodotus perceives his mission as retelling the stories told by various peoples. When Herodotus deigns to include his opinion on a matter, such as he does in 3.80-82, he acts contrary to his initial intent of documenting tales and states for the record that, despite disbelief among his audience, he accepts the attestations of his sources. Pritchett finds it notable that Fehling does not mention either 7.152.3 or 2.123.1,

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29 D. Fehling, Herodotus and His “Sources” (Great Britain: Redwood Burn Ltd: 1989) p. 122
30 ἐνθαῦτα μέγιστον δόμα ἔρω τοῖς μὴ ὀποδεκομένοις Ἑλλήνων Περσέων τοῖς ἔπτα ὸτάνεα γνώμην ὀποδέξαται ως κρεῦν εἶ ὑποκριτέσθαι Πέρσας (6.43.3)
two valuable accounts which show Herodotus’ intent and also the difference between telling and believing.

The claim made by How and Wells that the debate in 3.80-82 was indeed the “beginning of Greek political philosophy” 33 can be argued as well, although it was not deliberately constructed by Herodotus as such. The threefold division of constitutions appears frequently throughout history. 34 Aristotle echoes Darius’ devolution theory, that of democracy and oligarchy leading possibly to monarchy, in his Politics 1304b-1315b. Tacitus discourses upon it in 4.32-33 of his Annales. Thus, Herodotus’ constitutional debate can be deemed a springboard for much political thought in later years. However, contrary to what most scholars posit, the debate itself was not constructed as an exercise in philosophical thinking. Arthur Ferrill, in examining the arguments of the debate, notes that Darius does not refer to a monarchos as a tyrannos, while Otanes and Megabyzus do. “Since these speeches were undoubtedly never given, and were the product of Herodotus’ imagination in an attempt to deal with problems of political philosophy, we can conclude that he was not only aware of the conditions of the word tyrannos, but that he used the word with those connotations in mind.” 35 Yet another indicator of the authenticity of the debate (as believed by Herodotus) can be observed in that Darius does not satisfactorily counter Otanes’ opposition of monarchy as to the outrages inflicted upon the general populace. 36 Darius’ arguments do not point out any fallacies in Otanes’ thinking, nor does he propose any system

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32 τοίσι μὲν μὲν ὑπ’ Ἀιγυπτίων λεγομένοισι χράσθην ὑπὲρ τὰ τοιαύτα πιθανά ἐστι· ἐμοὶ δὲ παρὰ πάντα τὸν λόγον ὑπόχειται ὅτι τὰ λεγόμενα ὑπ’ ἑκάστων ἂκοή γράφι
36 Hdt. 3.82
of checks and balances. Thus, the entire debate is a retelling of the event as told to Herodotus by an informer; any other assertion, as we have seen, is incorrect.

A testament to Herodotus’ authenticity resides in the Darius Inscription at Bisitun [referred to by some as Behistun], deciphered by Sir Henry Rawlinson by 1847.37 This noted scholar spent countless hours deciphering the trilingual (Elamite, Akkadian and Old Persian) cuneiform texts, and from this labor springs most of our knowledge of Old Persian linguistics. The illustration at the center of the Persian masterpiece depicts attendants surrounding Darius, who crushes the false Smerdis/Bardiya beneath his foot. The inscription itself records the uprising of the conspirators against the usurper Magian, the establishment of Darius as king, and the endeavors by Darius to quell resultant revolts occurring throughout the empire. The accounts match up almost fully to the Herodotean discourse, and Richard Frye suggests: “the account of Herodotus also does not conflict with the story given by the Behistun inscription, and to paraphrase the two, this is the combined account.

Cambyses had a brother called Bardiya (Smerdis in Greek), both of the same mother. After he became king Cambyses murdered his brother but kept it a secret. When Cambyses was in Egypt a Magian called Gaumata (Herodotus says he had the same name as Bardiya) revolted and proclaimed himself Bardiya the true brother of Cambyses. The heart of the empire, Persis and Media, as well as other lands, supported the rebellion against Cambyses, but the latter died from a wound on the way back to Persis from Egypt.”38 When we compare the two accounts, we observe the closeness of Herodotus to the Darius inscription, with the two differing in the names of the conspirators by only one. As briefly alluded to previously in

this paper, the “false Smerdis/Bardiya” may, according to Olmstead, have in truth been the actual brother of Cambyses. Edwin Yamauchi further expounds upon this theory and its relation to Herodotus’ writings: “Although the correspondence between Herodotus and Darius’ Behistun inscription are undeniable, some scholars are suspicious of the latter account as an officially sponsored hoax. In their view, Herodotus’ faithful recounting of that version simply indicates his gullibility in believing the king’s propaganda.” Yamauchi cites this viewpoint as propounded by Hugo Winckler in the late 1800’s, claiming that Cambyses did not murder his brother Bardiya and that upon Cambyses’ death Bardiya assumed the throne. Darius, according to Winckler, slew the real heir and created a story about a usurper to legitimize the authority he stole. Thus, the inscription at Behistun, as posited above, was a propagandistic tool, a means of legitimization for Darius and a possible method for quelling the revolts which threatened to rend the empire apart.

While the Behistun inscription may appear at first important evidence for establishing the veracity of Herodotus’ assertions, it is in fact an indicator of how greatly the historian has fallen under the thrall of Darius’ propagandistic tactics. The differing viewpoints over who slew Bardiya at least leans slightly towards Herodotus in that he is inclined to discover the truth, although biased by his informer(s). The biases of Herodotus’ sources taint his History, but they do not make its author a fashioner of lies to enable a discourse on

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39 Olmstead, History of the Persian Empire, p. 108ff
40 Yamauchi, Persia and the Bible, p. 143
41 Behistun: “Not anyone dared say anything about Gaumata the Magian, until I came...A fortress by the name of Sikayauvati, a district by name Nisaya, in Media - there I slew him (1.48-61).” Herodotus: “(One Magian) defended himself with his spear and struck Aspathines in the thigh and Intaphernes in the eye...The other Magian...took refuge...and tried to shut the doors. But two of the seven, Darius and Gobryas, rushed in with him. Then Gobryas was locked in a fight with the Magian...Gobryas: ‘Drive the sword through...’ Darius obeyed, struck with his dagger, and by some chance reached the Magian only (3.78).”
philosophy. Thus, we find that Herodotus errs unwillingly if he accepts the inscription as truth.

Two seemingly unrelated passages in Herodotus’ *History* further support the assertion that the historian employed what he considered reliable sources in order to set down even the most minute details. The first occurs particularly late in the collection of λογοι, where Darius’ son Xerxes departs from Sardis in 480 B.C. and heads southwards from Therma.\(^42\) Herodotus describes in great detail the numerical breakdown of the army:

“Until they reached this place and Thermopylae, the forces of the barbarian sustained no losses at all, and their numbers, as I find by calculation, were still: in ships that came over from Asia, 1,207, and the whole sum of the nations that were aboard was 241,400 men, reckoning 200 men to a ship... So you see, if both navy and army are added together, the total comes to 2,317,610.”\(^43\)

Therein, Herodotus describes point for point the constituency of the ships. The accuracy of his recording is apportioned by Hignett: “Literary sources were certainly consulted by Herodotus, but they were not primarily historical, and the information he derived from them was of secondary importance. They included works on genealogy and geography, but these would be of little help to him in the last three books; there is no need to assume that large parts of his account of Xerxes’ march were simply adapted from a geographical handbook.”\(^44\) The historian likely consulted written sources, but more often attained his information from oral sources. The question that one derives from the numerical delineation described above is whether or not the reader believes Herodotus. The accuracy

\(^{42}\) Hdt. 7.183ff
\(^{43}\) Hdt. 7.184
\(^{44}\) Hignett, *Xerxes’ Invasion of Greece*, p. 32
of his accounting has been investigated before and will likely be pored over for centuries to come. The results are the same: combatants who had contact with the fleet of Xerxes would have known that Herodotus’ accounting was grossly exaggerated, and the authenticity of Herodotus’ entire work would be called into question. Thus, we have no choice but either to accept his assertion or else to discount the entire collection as replete with falsities.

The second example pertains to the satrapy list that Herodotus reports in 3.89-96. The historian presents an accounting of the various satraps (or provinces) in the Persian Empire and the tribute that they owed Darius. A similar list appears on the Behistun inscription (i,6), granting us yet another opportunity to test Herodotus’ authenticity. The list is too extensive to delve into within the confines of a paper, but suffice it to say that the Herodotus and Behistun lists do not differ drastically. Natural boundaries, however, shift from taxable (called a “tribute”) provinces. Burns rectifies: “[I]t appears clear that either the boundaries of taxation districts were different from those of governorships - which is improbable; we know that satraps were directly concerned with revenue - or the Persian monumental lists are not lists of the administrative satrapies, as modern scholars have often assumed, but simply of the chief peoples and lands over which the Great King ruled.”

The constitutional debate in Herodotus 3.80-82 was not crafted as an exercise in Greek political philosophy, as modern scholars would believe, but rather an analysis of an actual event, as reported by Herodotus’ sources. Within the last decade, scholars have allowed for the possibility that Persian sources provided information which Herodotus believed reliable. If Zopyrus, the son of Megabyzus who fled to Athens, was the source of this debate, his testimony would be tainted by the influences he encountered in Athens, his
place of residence at the time. A person’s perspective is influenced by his surroundings, and a Persian living in Athens would have experienced the same effect on his recounting of the debate. Likewise, if the source was not Zopyrus but some other Persian living in Athens and subject to sophistic philosophy, the same truth prevails: the account of the debate is tainted by the mingling of Persian history and Greek political thinking during the time of its retelling. As Aristotle determined, man is a political animal. Thus, an educated Persian would have engaged in discussions on political philosophy while in Athens and would likely be influenced by the ideas and argumentative manner of those with whom he conversed.

Examination of the Behistun inscription, the listing of Xerxes’ army and the satrapy list attest to the validity of Herodotus’ belief that the debate was an actual event rather than a work of fiction. While some examiners of Herodotean studies may purport that the History is replete with inaccuracies due to its author’s negligence or even willful complicity in creating false stories, Herodotus’ own assertions within the text reveal his desire to report the truth as he could best assess it.

The constitutional debate presented by Herodotus in Book 3, Sections 80-82, recognized by the author himself as the subject of much skepticism, exemplifies the Greek historian’s task to truthfully present a snapshot of Persian philosophical and political development amidst upheaval. In depicting this event, Herodotus supplies not only a profound example of his reliance on unreliable sources, but also his fervent desire to discern historical accuracy from rumor and supposition. While neither an analysis of an actual event in the development of Persian government nor an exercise in Greek political philosophy, as modern scholars purport, the description is Herodotus’ earnest desire to portray Persian ideas.

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45 Burns, *Persia and the Greeks*, p. 111
(albeit in the phrases of the author’s countrymen) and the frank discussion between conspirators on the brink of a new order.

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