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Croesus, Xerxes, and the Denial of Death (Herodotus 1.29–34; 7.44–53)*

WILLIAM N. TURPIN

ABSTRACT: Herodotus portrays both Croesus and Xerxes as resolutely unaware of their own mortality, despite conversations about the life span of an ordinary human (Croesus), and the mortality of his massive army (Xerxes). Part of what makes Croesus and Xerxes hubristic, for Herodotus, is their obliviousness to this salient aspect of their humanity.

Herodotus presents two complementary conversations about the human condition, between Croesus and Solon in book 1, and between Xerxes and Artabanus in book 7.¹ This paper will argue that an important dimension has usually been overlooked by scholars: both Croesus and Xerxes are reminded that death is the inevitable fate of all human beings, but neither king sees that he is just as mortal as everyone else.

Croesus, confident in his worldly happiness, raises the question of human happiness in general. Solon's reply reveals a surprising, almost morbid, interest in death. He speaks first about Tellus the Athenian, who concluded a rich and full life by dying for his country (1.30.3–4), and then about Cleobis and Biton, whose main claim to happiness was dying for their mother and for Hera (1.31). Croesus, however, shows no interest in the way these men died, and remains focused on their status and wealth: Ὡ χεῖνε Ἀθηναῖε, ἢ δ' ἡμετέρη εὐδαιμονίη οὕτω τοι ἀπέρριπται ἐς τὸ μηδέν, ὥστε οὐδὲ ἰδιωτέων ἀνδρῶν ἀξίους ἡμέας ἐποίησας; ("That's all very well, my Athenian friend; but what of my own happiness? Is it so utterly contemptible that you won't even compare me with mere common folk like those you have mentioned?" 1.32.1).²

* I am very grateful to my colleague Rosaria Munson for her thoughtful comments.

¹ For comparisons of the two episodes in general, see T. Harrison, *Divinity and History: The Religion of Herodotus* (Oxford 2000) 33–51. For the parallel between Croesus contemplating his treasures and Xerxes surveying his troops, see D. Konstan, "Persians, Greeks and Empire." *Arethusa* 20 (1987) 68.

² Greek is cited from the OCT of Hude; translations are from J. Marincola, ed., A. de Sélincourt, tr., *Herodotus, The Histories* (London 1996).

So Solon spells out what he means. Moving on from Tellus, who died in the prime of life, and Cleobis and Biton, who were young, Solon introduces a hypothetical man living out his allotted span of seventy years. Solon calculates, with a startling focus on the arithmetic, that a seventy-year-old man would have 26,250 days on which something could go wrong (1.32.2–4). Wealth, therefore, is no guarantee of happiness, and the poor have a better chance of being happy (1.32.5–6). Given how much time there is for disaster to happen, you can only decide that a life is happy when it is over.

Thus far, on the face of it, Solon has been focused on Croesus' particular situation, and on the importance of death in assessing it. But as he continues, Solon sounds more and more as if he is talking about people in general, and the fact of their mortality:

εἰ δὲ πρὸς τούτοισι ἔτι τελευτήσῃ τὸν βίον εὖ, οὗτος ἐκεῖνος τὸν σὺ ζητέεις, <ὁ> ὄλβιος κεκλησθαι ἄξιός ἐστι· πρὶν δ' ἂν τελευτήσῃ ἐπισχεῖν μηδὲ καλέειν κω ὄλβιον, ἀλλ' εὐτυχέα.

(1.32.7)

Now if a man thus favoured dies as he has lived, he will be just the one you are looking for: the only sort of person who deserves to be called happy. But mark this: until he is dead, keep the word “happy” in reserve. Till then he is not happy, but only lucky.

This is a clear enough reminder of human mortality, but Solon makes the point again:

τὰ πάντα μὲν νυν ταῦτα συλλαβεῖν ἄνθρωπον ἐόντα ἀδύνατόν ἐστι, ὡς περ χάρη οὐδεμία καταρκέει πάντα ἐωυτῇ παρέχουσα, ἀλλὰ ἄλλο μὲν ἔχει, ἑτέρου δὲ ἐπιδέεται· ἢ δὲ ἂν τὰ πλεῖστα ἔχη, αὕτη ἀρίστη. ὡς δὲ καὶ ἀνθρώπου σῶμα ἐν οὐδὲν αὐταρκές ἐστι· τὸ μὲν γὰρ ἔχει, ἄλλου δὲ ἐνδεές ἐστι. ὅς δ' ἂν αὐτῶν πλεῖστα ἔχων διατελέῃ καὶ ἔπειτα τελευτήσῃ εὐχαρίστως τὸν βίον, οὗτος παρ' ἐμοὶ τὸ οὖνομα τοῦτο, ὃ βασιλεῦ, δίκαιός ἐστι φέρεσθαι.

(1.32.8–9)

Nobody of course can have all these advantages, any more than a country can produce everything it needs: whatever it has, it is bound to lack something. The best country is the one that has the most. It is the same with people: no man is ever self-sufficient—there is sure to be something missing. But whoever has the greatest number of the good things I have mentioned, and keeps them to the end, and dies a peaceful death, that man, Croesus, deserves in my opinion to be called happy.

The principle gets extended to entire nations, which can fall victim to hubris as well as individuals.³ But Solon returns to the individual human being, and to death as the final arbiter.

Solon concludes with a sweeping statement about the human condition: πολλοῖσι γὰρ δὴ ὑποδέξας ὄλβον ὁ θεὸς προορίζους ἀνέτρεψε (“Often enough God gives a man a glimpse of happiness, and then utterly ruins him,” 1.32.9). In theory this could be yet another comment on the problem of assessment, on the fact that you never know what is going to happen. But it is framed by a much more pointed remark about death in general: σκοπέειν δὲ χρὴ παντὸς χρήματος τὴν τελευτὴν κῆ ἀποβήσεται (“Look to the end, no matter what it is you are considering. Often enough God gives a man a glimpse of happiness, and then utterly ruins him,” 1.32.9). Any failure to forget the basic fact of human mortality is likely to lead to disaster.

Croesus thinks Solon is a fool for insisting on this fact, and sends him away:

ταῦτα λέγων τῷ Κροίσῳ οὐ κως οὔτε ἐχαρίζετο, οὔτε λόγου μιν ποιησάμενος οὐδενὸς ἀποπέμπεται, κάρτα δόξας ἀμαθέα εἶναι, ὃς τὰ παρεόντα ἀγαθὰ μετεῖς τὴν τελευτὴν παντὸς χρήματος ὁρᾶν ἐκέλευε.
(1.33)

These sentiments were not of the sort to give Croesus any pleasure; he let Solon go with cold indifference, firmly convinced that he was a fool. For what could be more stupid than to keep telling him to look to the “end” of everything, without regard to present prosperity?

Croesus does not understand Solon’s initial point, that “present prosperity” is no guarantee of future happiness. And he does not yet understand that “the end” is coming. He simply does not see that the fact of human mortality matters.

Xerxes, at Abydos, raises the question of human mortality himself, but like Croesus he resolutely ignores the implications.⁴ Surveying his enormous army and navy from a special throne set up at Abydos, and

³ On this theme, see esp. C. W. Fornara, *Herodotus: An Interpretative Essay* (Oxford 1971).

⁴ For a discussion of various translations of this passage, see S. J. Willett, “Catching Xerxes’ Tears in English: The Styles of Herodotean Translation,” *Arion* 8 (2000) 119–43.

after enjoying a boat race, Xerxes at first takes pleasure in his great good fortune.⁵ But he is soon overwhelmed with sadness:

ὡς δὲ ὅρα πάντα μὲν τὸν Ἑλλήσποντον ὑπὸ τῶν νεῶν ἀποκεκρυμμένον,
πάσας δὲ τὰς ἀκτὰς καὶ τὰ Ἀβυδηῶν πεδία ἐπίπλεα ἀνθρώπων, ἐνθαῦτα
ὁ Ξέρξης ἑωυτὸν ἑμακάρισε, μετὰ δὲ τοῦτο ἐδάκρυσε.

(7.45)

And when he saw the whole Hellespont hidden by ships, and all the beaches and plains of Abydos filled with men, he called himself happy—and the moment after burst into tears.

Many readers understand this response as thoughtful and compassionate.⁶ But in my view Herodotus is presenting us with yet another example of Xerxes' hubris, as powerful in its way as the flogging of the Hellespont.⁷ Xerxes, unlike Croesus, is actually interested in the fact of human mortality, but only in the abstract; he fails to see the relevance to himself.⁸

⁵ Polycrates had already come to grief because of an excessive preoccupation with his possessions (Hdt. 3.41). On Xerxes' subsequent countings of his soldiers and his ships, see Hdt. 7.60, with Konstan (above, n.1) 64–65.

⁶ Ph.-E. Legrand (*Hérodote, Histoires: Livre VII* [Paris 1951] 85 n.2) refers to “tristesse philosophique.” H. R. Immerwahr (“Historical Action in Herodotus,” *TAPA* 85 (1954)) calls this “the ancient lyric sentiment that life is so short.” S. Flory (“Laughter, Tears and Wisdom in Herodotus,” *AJP* 99 [1978] 146) sees Xerxes' initial happiness as “mindless and innocent.” D. Lateiner (“Tears and Crying in Hellenic Historiography: Dacryology from Herodotus to Polybius,” in T. Fögen, ed., *Tears in the Graeco-Roman World* [Berlin and New York 2009] 121) refers to “generous tears for human ephemerality.” E. Baragwanath (*Motivation and Narrative in Herodotus* [Oxford 2008] 266) calls Xerxes' explanation “a quite profound insight.”

For the view that Herodotus is generally quite positive about Xerxes, see K. H. Waters, *Herodotos on Tyrants and Despots: A Study in Objectivity* (Wiesbaden 1971) 65–79; D. Lateiner, *The Historical Method of Herodotus* (Toronto 1989) 152–53; J. A. S. Evans, *Herodotus, Explorer of the Past: Three Essays* (Princeton 1991) 60–67. N. R. E. Fisher (*Hybris: A Study in the Values of Honour and Shame in Ancient Greece* [Warminster 1992] 376) says: “At times he is courteous, very ready to consult and listen to his advisers, generous towards friends, allies and servants, and, among his varied moods and emotions, there appears at times an appealing sympathy for the human condition.” Cf. Immerwahr (above) 176–83, which remains a persuasive account of Xerxes in Herodotus as “an extreme example of the typical great ruler whose pride leads to his fall” (178).

⁷ On hubris and Herodotus' account of Xerxes, see Fisher (above, n.6) 367–85. Fisher's book should be read in light of D. L. Cairns, “*Hybris*, Dishonour, and Thinking Big,” *JHS* 116 (1996) 1–32.

⁸ This seems to be the reading of W. C. Greene, *Moirai: Fate, Good and Evil in Greek Thought* (Cambridge, Mass., 1944) 86–87, and of Harrison (above, n.1) 50: “He had been

Xerxes' tunnel vision on this point is underscored by his subsequent conversation with Artabanus, who wants to know more about those tears:

μαθὼν δὲ μιν Ἀρτάβανος ὁ πάτριος, ὃς τὸ πρῶτον γνώμην ἀπεδέξατο ἐλευθέρως οὐ συμβουλεύων Ξέρξῃ στρατεύεσθαι ἐπὶ τὴν Ἑλλάδα, οὗτος ὄνῃρ φρασθεὶς Ξέρξην δακρύσαντα εἶρετο τάδε· ὦ βασιλεῦ, ὡς πολλὸν ἀλλήλων κεχωρισμένα ἐργάσαο νῦν τε καὶ ὀλίγῳ πρότερον· μακαρίσας γὰρ σεαυτὸν δακρῦεις.

(7.46.1)

Artabanus his uncle, the man who in the first instance had spoken his mind so freely in trying to dissuade Xerxes from undertaking the campaign, was by his side; and when he saw how Xerxes wept, he said to him: “My lord, surely there is a strange contradiction in what you do now and what you did a moment ago. Then you called yourself a happy man—and now you weep.”

The reappearance of Artabanus reminds us that the self-confidence of Xerxes is probably unjustified, given the explicit reference to his earlier misgivings about the invasion. Xerxes, in his reply, reveals that what he has been thinking about is life, and death. But he has not been thinking very clearly:

ὁ δὲ εἶπε· Ἐσῆλθε γάρ με λογιζάμενον κατοικτῆραι ὡς βραχὺς εἶη ὁ πᾶς ἀνθρώπινος βίος, εἰ τούτων γε ἐόντων τοσούτων οὐδεὶς ἐξ ἑκατοστὸν ἔτος περιέσται.

(7.46.2)

“I was thinking,” Xerxes replied; “and it came into my mind how pitifully short human life⁹ is—for of all these thousands of men not one will be alive in a hundred years’ time.”

contemplating the brevity of human life, how none of the men beneath him would be alive in a hundred years. He does not comment on the brevity of his own life.” See also Konstan (above, n.1) 64: “I should not want to take Xerxes’ pessimistic reflection upon the brevity of life as the sign that he has, contrary to his customary confidence, momentarily acquired a deeper insight. I should say rather that it is the entirely characteristic view of a man who measures time as he does power, in terms of quantity.”

⁹ Literally, of course, what Xerxes says is that “the *whole* of human life is short.” Though not the same as “*every* human life,” which would be even more pointed, the phrase does suggest that Xerxes is thinking of human life in the abstract, and the common inheritance of every human being.

Instead of saying that “we” are all mortal, as might have been expected, Xerxes points dramatically to “all these people here” (τούτων γε ἐόντων τοσούτων). Life is short, and his soldiers and sailors are all going to die, but Xerxes sees that only as *their* problem.

The problem with Xerxes’ thinking is then underscored by Artabanus, in some breathtakingly pessimistic remarks about the human condition. The key assumption is that death is, indeed, a fact of life for everyone:

ὁ δὲ ἀμείβετο λέγων· Ἔτερα τούτου παρὰ τὴν ζόην πεπόνθαμεν οἰκτρότερα. ἐν γὰρ οὕτω βραχεῖ βίῳ οὐδεὶς οὕτως ἄνθρωπος ἐὼν εὐδαίμων πέφυκε, οὔτε τούτων οὔτε τῶν ἄλλων, τῷ οὐ παραστήσεται πολλάκις καὶ οὐκὶ ἅπαζ τεθνάναι βούλεσθαι μᾶλλον ἢ ζῶειν. αἱ τε γὰρ συμφοραὶ προσπίπτουσαι καὶ αἱ νοῦσοι συνταράσσουσαι καὶ βραχὺν ἔοντα μακρὸν δοκέειν εἶναι ποιεῦσι τὸν βίον. οὕτως ὁ μὲν θάνατος μοχθηρῆς ἐούσης τῆς ζόης καταφυγὴ αἰρετωτάτη τῷ ἀνθρώπῳ γέγονε ὁ δὲ θεὸς γλυκὺν γεύσας τὸν αἰῶνα φθονερός ἐν αὐτῷ εὐρίσκεται ἐὼν.

(7.46.2–4)

“Yet,” said Artabanus, “we suffer sadder things in life even than that. Short as it is, there is not a man in the world, either here or elsewhere, who is happy enough not to wish—not once only, but again and again—to be dead rather than alive. Troubles come, diseases afflict us; and this makes life, despite its brevity, seem all too long. So heavy is the burden of it that death is a refuge which we all desire, and it is common proof amongst us that God who gave us a taste of this world’s sweetness has been jealous in his giving.”

Readers have little difficulty in seeing an allusion to Xerxes’ impending disasters, but we notice also that Artabanus, unlike Xerxes, is acutely aware that death is universal. Artabanus tries hard to make Xerxes realize that he’s no different from anyone else, telling him that “we all suffer” (πεπόνθαμεν, 7.46.2). He knows perfectly well that the host of soldiers and sailors are not the only mortals present at Abydos: the wish to be dead will occur to them, *and to others* (οὔτε τούτων οὔτε τῶν ἄλλων, 7.46.3).

Xerxes says that he agrees with Artabanus, but he is not really looking at things in the same way. He simply wants to bring the conversation to an end, and pointedly refuses to think about what Artabanus has actually said:

Ξέρξης δὲ ἀμείβετο λέγων· Ἀρτάβανε, βιοτῆς μὲν νυν ἀνθρωπίνης πέρι, ἐούσης τοιαύτης οἴην περ σὺ διαιρέαι εἶναι, παυσώμεθα, μηδὲ κακῶν μεμνώμεθα χρηστά ἔχοντες πρήγματα ἐν χερσὶ.

(7.47.1)

“Artabanus,” Xerxes replied, “the lot of men here upon earth is indeed as you have described it; but let us put aside these gloomy reflections, for we have pleasant things at hand.”

Here de Sélincourt’s translation is a little misleading. Xerxes dismisses not “gloomy reflections” but “evil things” more generally.¹⁰ These surely include death. Having been invited to reflect on mortality, his own as well as everyone else’s, Xerxes simply refuses to listen.

Ernest Becker, in his *Denial of Death*, famously argued that human psychology is dominated by the unwillingness to accept mortality.¹¹ And while Herodotus was of course less psychological in his approach to the human condition, he anticipated Becker’s brilliant insight in his own way. Herodotus certainly did not see an unwillingness to face death as a part of the human condition in general. Like all Greeks he knew that only the gods were immortal,¹² and that for humans life is short and its pleasures fleeting. He also knew that some people could forget this, and that that was a bad sign: the denial of death was hubris.¹³

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¹⁰ Thus R. Waterfield (*Herodotus: The Histories* [Oxford, 1998]) translates: “We shouldn’t talk about bad things when involved in good things like our current project.”

¹¹ E. Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York 1973).

¹² M. P. Nilsson (*A History of Greek Religion* [New York 1964] 157) states: “The immortality of the gods drew a clear line of demarcation which man could not pass. In other respects no such line exists. The gods are stronger, wiser, more powerful than men, but this is merely a question of degree.” See also J.-P. Vernant, “Mortals and Immortals: The Body of the Divine,” in F. I. Zeitlin, ed., *Mortals and Immortals: Collected Essays* (Princeton, 1991) 27–49. See Hdt. 2.78 for the Egyptians and *memento mori*.

¹³ See also Pi. *I.* 5.16: θνατὰ θνατοσι πρέπει.; Pi. *O.* 1.59–65; Aesch. *PV* 82–87; 545–551; Ag. 1022–1024; Eur. *Alc.* 123–129.