

Tomyris, Queen of the Massagetes A Mystery in Herodotus's *History*

The polypragmon and fond of learning Herodotus shows a special interest for the queens-warriors of the barbaric world, whose power and autonomy has transformed them in objects of admiration and fear, primarily for his own male audience. Tomyris of the Massagetes¹ - who we meet in the end of the first book of *Histories*- coincides with this female figure, while at the same time she provides both the historian as well us, with enigmatic nuggets of people's knowledge in the borders of the vast Persian empire². Nevertheless, she will be mostly remembered for her crucial involvement in Cyrus' death, which occupies undeniably, a prominent position among the early and most glorious Persian monarchs³ and dominates, together with Croesus, in the pages of the first book of Herodotus.

We have already read about his birth and the legends associated with his youthful age (1107-1122), for his successful uprising and his ascent to the throne, but also for the gradual spread of the Persian domination in Lydia, Ionia and the rest of Asia (1141-176), in a bold and direct manner, that underlines the reckless spirit of the mighty warrior-king. Uttermost station of this unrestrained and victorious path is the capture of rich Babylon. From this point⁴ on starts the massagetian "speech", with details regarding the last expedition and the death⁵ of the ambitious ruler, without anything, from the outset, to prejudice his tragic end.

After the necessary prior information on the geographical placement⁶ of Cyrus' remote nomadic tribe-target, Herodotus indicates and justifies the willingness – as well as the certainty – of the raider for the successful outcome of his new war project:

For there were many weighty reasons that impelled and encouraged him to do so: first, his birth, because of which he seemed to be something more than mortal; and next, his victories in his wars.. (1.204.2)

The conceit that overpowers Cyrus, while at the peak of his power, reaches the limits of insolence and prepares the reader-familiar with the herodotian biotheory for the reversal of fate and for the end of the monarch⁷. The efforts undertaken by the

¹ The Massagetes were a large and belligerent tribe living beyond Araxes river, in the east coast of the Caspian sea, in today's Turkestan. See also Asheri, Lloyd & Corcella 2007, 212-213 with additional bibliography, How & Wells 1928, 172, Müller 1997, 99.

² See. Payen (1991) 254.

³ Although the reign of Cyrus extends and covers almost three decades (559-530 BC), the historical value of the information available to us for him is highly questionable. For a more detailed elaboration on the subject see especially Parker & Dubberstein (1971) 14, Brosius 1996, 41-45, de Miroschedji (1985) 298-306. For the life and history of Cyrus see Von Fritz 1967, 282, while for his weddings, offering measurable chronological footholds, see Justi 1963, 189-190.

⁴ See 1.201-216.

⁵ In antiquity, there were various and contradictory versions about the last campaign and the circumstances surrounding the death of Cyrus. Herodotus chooses one of them that considers apparently, the most notable. In this foggy atmosphere, the general historical value of the particular Herodotus' 'speech' weakens significantly. See Asheri, Lloyd & Corcella 2007, 212 & 216, Sancisi-Weerdenburg 1985, 459-471, Hirsch 1985, 81.

⁶ For the geography of the region see Cary & Warmington 1963, 163-167, 185-186 and 198-199, Bosworth 1988, 129-132.

⁷ See Asheri, Lloyd & Corcella 2007, 214.

historian to interpret this arrogance is done on psychological terms and is enhanced by recalling the chain of past Persian triumphs. The king cannot have the slightest hint of suspicion that is approaching not just his ruin, but also his death.

After the 'supernatural' portrait of Cyrus, we are surprised at a sudden reference to a completely unknown woman:

Now at this time the Massagetae were ruled by a queen called Tomyris, whose husband was. (1.205.1)

The decoding of this first information for her character shows that Tomyris⁸ was proclaimed queen after the death of her husband and probably she was not looking forward to a scenario of conflict with the undefeated ruler. However, neither had he wished initially for a military confrontation, yet what he was pursuing, with his fraudulent marriage proposal was not to "conquer" her, but her kingdom. Until this point, Cyrus is an active leader, the hyper-optimistic pole, the raider teeming with insatiable desire for new lands and their queen. Cyrus features an "identity", while Tomyris - beyond her name and status - essentially does not seem to have anything else to show. What kind of response could we expect from this woman and her nomadic tribe on the fringes of the civilized world?

Soon these estimates will be proved to be hasty and they will be refuted, as we witness the onset of Tomyris' action: with a move that reaffirms her power and simultaneously her perceptual capacity, she will reject the insidious approach of Cyrus⁹, being conscious that such a courageous choice would entail – but also hasten – the martial 'response' on his behalf. Indeed, the bridging of the river Araxes¹⁰ launches the impressive Persian expedition against the Massagetons, but also the equally impressive Tomyris' response, which Herodotus animates and formulates into direct speech:

O king of the Medes, stop hurrying on what you are hurrying on, for you cannot know whether the completion of this work will be for your advantage. Stop, and be king of your own country; and endure seeing us ruling those whom we rule. (1.206.1)

The first words of the Queen, in contrast to the arrogant certainty of Cyrus, contain a warning-negative pattern that discounts somehow for the upcoming end of the monarch. At the same time, she utters with determination her exhortations, and the urgency of her tone is enhanced by the selective use of Imperatives¹¹. Certainly her attitude surprises us, not just because she is a woman of barbaric origin, but rather because she is addressing the undefeated Persian king, who seeks as a predator to devour yet another prey. Indeed Tomyris, anticipating her opponent's offensive force

⁸ Although it is impossible to determine the historicity of Tomyris, we can speculate that she was indeed the queen of Massagetons and leader of her people in the fight against the invading Persians. This does not mean, of course, that Herodotus' narration does not recruit simultaneously an intense fictional character. See also Asheri, Lloyd & Corcella 2007, 214.

⁹ See Payen (1991) 253.

¹⁰ The crossing of rivers or other water passages (as in the case of the Hellespont) is a constant herodotian pattern, which always highlights the *hybris* of the aggressor, as a result of his stubbornness. See also Immerwahr 1966, 292, Tourraix 1976, 377 and in particular Payen 1991, 255-257, who is listing the corresponding movements of Darius, Xerxes, and (the same) Cyrus on his way to conquer Babylon.

¹¹ For the particular semantic difference in the use of imperatives, depending on the time at which it occurs, see especially Sicking 1991, 154-170, also Rijksbaron 2002, 45.

and the rejection of her appeals, goes that far as to let him choose the battlefield ground, and this essentially is the finishing touch in her first resounding intervention in the history of Cyrus' death. I have the feeling that this woman shouts as the strong one, not as the defending one, speaks with the prudence and the composure of a leader in complete control of matters and situations, who is able to warn, to offer options, propose solutions, and if necessary, to provoke fearlessly into conflict.

Cyrus must respond, he must react, this is what we expect at least, from such a powerful and overweening ruler. However, a delay is detected in action, as we read about the convening of a special council with the top of the Persians, in which the final decisions will be taken. Herodotus displays all noble counselors to turn a deaf ear and ignore Tomyris' initial precepts, with their recommendations focusing exclusively in the dilemma of choosing the grounds of the armed confrontation. At this point they reach a unanimous agreement:

They all spoke to the same end, urging him to let Tomyris and her army enter his country. (1.206.3)

However, the intervention of the elderly Croesus from Lydia is enough to reverse the outcome.

Herodotus was obviously fascinated and dealt a lot with Croesus, the arrogant leader, whose omnipotence resulted in captivity and his untold riches gave way to poverty and - almost - his death. Now, at the sunset of a life that ought to have transformed the "sufferings" in to "lessons"¹² of wisdom, Croesus will prove incapable of providing a positive opinion to Cyrus and disagreeing with the rest of the counselors, he will recommend the fatal continuation of the campaign and the aggressive crossing of the Araxes River. Indeed, the old Lydian, at the end of his lengthy speech, unfolds a trick to ease the raiders and simplify their work, but in effect he will activate, as it will be seen below, the dynamic reappearance of Tomyris:

As I understand, the Massagetae have no experience of the good things of Persia, and have never fared well as to what is greatly desirable. Therefore, I advise you to cut up the meat of many of your sheep and goats into generous portions for these men, and to cook it and serve it as a feast in our camp, providing many bowls of unmixed wine and all kinds of food. Then let your army withdraw to the river again, leaving behind that part of it which is of least value. For if I am not mistaken in my judgment, when the Massagetae see so many good things they will give themselves over to feasting on them; and it will be up to us then to accomplish great things. (1.207.6-7)

The quick prevalence of the unsuspecting Massageton against a weak expeditionary corps and their subsequent involvement in a rich and well prepared wassail¹³, unusual for their lifestyle, would lead – according to Croesus – to their easy trapping inside the Persian camp.

Cyrus immediately revises and endorses the plan of his Lydian adviser. Why? Maybe because he overestimates Croesus and his abilities, going as far as to overrule the unanimous views of the whole of the Persian nobility. Perhaps again, because, apart from the far-reaching military campaigns, he was charmed equally by the

¹² See Dörrie 1956, 19-20.

¹³ For the vocabulary that is appropriate to festivals and other rituals, see analytically Casabona 1966, 155-195.

mysterious, obscure and fraudulent acts, like those heard from the lips of his old age consultant. But, as the first trick of the deceptive marriage proposal of Cyrus to Tomyris failed, we have no reason to believe that it will eventually assume in the second trick. I am under the impression that if Cyrus and Croesus conclude in such a pernicious decision, this is because, in general through the *Histories*, every ambitious conqueror is unable to acquire the Other's, the Deferent's minimum knowledge, before overcomes him. This is much more complex and complicated than the simple recognition of the "queerness" of a nation, against whom he is going to turn his weapons. For anyone hoping to penetrate the waters of new and unknown people, should first gain access to the codes of its diversity, inside where though rests the authenticity of every race. While Cyrus consents to "antiheroic" fraudulence, Tomyris stands heroically faithful to her genuine propositions:

So these opinions clashed; and Cyrus set aside his former plan and chose that of Croesus; consequently, he told Tomyris to draw her army off, for he would cross (he said) and attack her; so she withdrew as she had promised before. (1.208)

Everything portends a vehement conflict. It should, however, be preceded by the crucial episode of Spargapisis.

Croesus' plan is followed to the rule: the initial winners the Massagetes are then defeated by themselves, being lured into debauchery and ultimately, exhausted and asleep, they become an easy prey to the Persians, who kill and capture many of them¹⁴. Among the captives is Tomyris' son Spargapisis, valuable loot in the hands of the invaders. This new person that enters so unexpectedly in the story will remain silent until the end, and anything we learn about him, is associated with the concern and the actions of his mother. Apparently the young man was in the appropriate age to lead an army, although he was not yet the king of his people, consequently the next move-response in the chessboard strategy should be done by Tomyris.

Indeed, the mighty queen responds instantaneously and through a herald, addresses Cyrus in a thunderous, sovereign and predictive speech of the things to come:

Cyrus who can never get enough blood, do not be elated by what you have done; it is nothing to be proud of if, by the fruit of the vine—with which you Persians fill yourselves and rage so violently that evil words rise in a flood to your lips when the wine enters your bodies—if, by tricking him with this drug, you got the better of my son, and not by force of arms in battle. (1.212.2)

Tomyris calls him not to boast of a fraudulent victory (*tricking*), which temporarily placed the monarch in an advantageous position. She would accept the defeat of her child only if she had been there with her arms. While Cyrus did not satiated his blood thirst, the primitive milk drinkers¹⁵ Massagetes and Spargapisis had forgotten their safe tribal habits and committed the fatal mistake-tempted to sate from the unprecedented and inebriating wine¹⁶, whose dizziness pushed others to death and others into captivity.

But Tomyris' wisdom – in a strange for her sex and her cultural identity manner - exceeds the anger; the maternal craving overcomes her heroism: she is ready

¹⁴ See 1.211.2-3.

¹⁵ See 1.216.4.

¹⁶ For the connection between wine and blood, see Immerwahr 1966, 165-167.

to leave unpunished the audacious and sneaky attack against her own people, in exchange for the coveted salvation of her son. Otherwise, she states emphatically:

But if you will not, then I swear to you by the sun, lord of the Massagetae, that I shall give even you who can never get enough of it your fill of blood. (1.212.3)

So once again we read about the pattern of blood and we perceive that this anticipates for the impending end of the story, the end of Cyrus himself. In a story with "innocent" and "guilty", the latter appear temporarily triumphant, although the former have by no means yet their weapons surrendered. Nevertheless, it is remarkable that a barbarian queen fearlessly dares and threatens him, who, until then, had managed to sow everywhere terror and despair!

Cyrus does not answer to Tomyris' requests, either because he underestimates a culturally subordinate woman, or because this first Persian victory gave him the luxury to gain time and to expect the complete subjugation of the Massagets. The ostentatious indifference of the king turns the headlights of interest to the prisoner Spargapisis, who

after the wine wore off and he recognized his evil plight, asked Cyrus to be freed from his bonds; and this was granted him; but as soon as he was freed and had the use of his hands, he did away with himself. (1.213)

The young man commits suicide, and this is not a confession of cowardice, but a self-punishment for the evil that as a leader caused to his people, or at least to a part of his army. Maybe he has tried himself strictly, but undeniably, the choice of such a death involves responsibility and heroism. Heroism that shortly will migrate practically towards the Queen.

Indeed, the tragic initiative of the son generates directly the reaction of the mother, which staying loyal to her commitments, will bring together all her available forces for the deadly attack against the Persians, or rather against Cyrus. The fact of the invasion itself becomes secondary: instead of the big imperial army mainly is the leader himself targeted, as the perpetrator of the death of a beloved young man. The vivid description of the terrible bloodshed¹⁷, the swarms of the ejected arrows and the cruel fights in close-quarters, body to body, until the final victory of the Massagets and the slaughter of Cyrus, confirms once again the rare talent of the writer Herodotus, who gives the impression that he is clearly speaking, while he is actually writing.

We read about the end of Cyrus, but not for the disgrace of his soulless body! The last moment of the story is devoted entirely to this strange queen of the north:

Tomyris filled a skin with human blood, and searched among the Persian dead for Cyrus' body; and when she found it, she pushed his head into the skin, and insulted the dead man in these words: "Though I am alive and have defeated you in battle, you have destroyed me, taking my son by guile; but just as I threatened, I give you your fill of blood." (1.214.4-5)

The woman, who had renounced her cultural primitivism, drew it up to the surface with the desecration of a deceased. While she proclaims the honorable fulfillment of

¹⁷ See 1.214.2.

her threatening words and the noble, almost Achillian contempt for the deceitfulness of the enemy, at the same time pushes macabre his severed head inside a skin sack filled not with wine, but with human blood¹⁸. The straightness and the sincerity - the main components of a civilized world – are mixed with the ferocity and the brutality, and this mixture meets its basic representative in a curious female figure, more "male" than her rivals.

Finally what exactly is Tomyris? In brief, is she an intelligent queen who defends and avenges¹⁹, painted with colors that were created largely in the epic tradition²⁰? I think she is something more, that her story, grafted with a fair amount of literature, has various aspects, and this is probably what piqued Herodotus' attention, to select the particular version to narrate the death of Cyrus. Her course in the last chapters of the first book of *Histories* becomes gradually - and impressively - rising, as she transforms from an obscure queen to a capable leader, from a seemingly low obstacle in front of the expectations of the great monarch to an insurmountable wall that will scatter havoc.

We do not learn anything about her past; perhaps Herodotus himself does not possess some valid information. On the other hand, since she is at the apex of power, she is experiencing more intensely, from there, the foreign threat: she sees her nomadic people to be targeted by an insatiable megalomaniac conqueror, who feels that the Persian cultural superiority, coupled with deceit and the previous innumerable military successes, are sufficient to celebrate yet another imperialist triumph. But this barbaric woman carries something of the glorious world of heroes, that historically fascinated so much the ancient Greeks and this epic dimension of her nature would impel her to do what every hero knows to do better: Tomyris will fight.

The situation is further aggravated when she is informed of the first defeat of the Massagets in a completely antiheroic battle field and at the same time of the capture of her son. The queen is not daunted, although the circumstances are not favorable: she takes the initiative to converse, to propose, to let to her great enemy the option of releasing Spargapises, or she will have his own death. But instead of taking even a negative response, she will hear the news of her child's suicide. And then the punishment is the only way; the defender becomes the attacker, the hunter becomes the prey, and the Persians suffered a defeat, which means not just the failure of the invasion, but marks also the tragic end of their multi-year reign.

I have the impression that on Tomyris' face is not mirrored David defeating Goliath, but a conscious, primitive existence, with genuine feelings of protectionism for her people and vast maternal love for her son, a woman who knows well to warn and to defeat, but even better, knows how to revenge: when she is looking expectantly for the corpse of Cyrus, she then mangles it and plunges with hate his severed head in a skin bag full of blood, witnessing a scene that shocks not just for the brutality of its content, but also for the wrath of the woman-beast that protagonists. If the story stopped abruptly in the death of Cyrus, we will be feeling only admiration for the stance and path and merits of this particular female figure from a forgotten world. Herodotus was probably asking more of us: also not to forget completely her barbaric temperament and identity.

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¹⁸ See Dewald 1981, 109, Hazewindus 2004, 175.

¹⁹ See Flory 1987, 42 and 95-96.

²⁰ See Gould 1989, 102-103.

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