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# The Beginning of Evils (Herodotus 5.97) from a Persian Perspective

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**Summary:** In a passage that uses a Homeric formula to invest the events with epic significance, Herodotus identified the moment Athenian ships participated in the sack of Sardis as “the beginning of evils for Greeks and Barbarians.” Behind that reference lies a complex web of past events involving human and metahuman actors, legible in different fashion from Greek and Persian perspectives. Focus on the latter brings to light religious aspects of imperial ideology, including Truth as the basis of cosmic order, the sacred nature of treaty commitments, and the palin-genetic significance of the gifts of earth and water demanded by and presented to the Achaemenid King.

**Keywords:** Persian Wars, Herodotus, Sack of Sardis, Earth and Water, Achaemenid Ideology

## I

Students of the epic have long noted the way a passing comment in the “Iliad” traced the suffering, death, and destruction of the Trojan War to an unexpected starting point. The passage recounts the death of Phereklos, a soldier of no particular importance, who otherwise goes unmentioned.

“Meriones killed Phereklos, son of the craftsman  
Harmonides, who knew how to fashion all cunning works  
With his hands, for Pallas Athene loved him exceedingly.  
He built Paris’s well-balanced ships,  
The beginning of evils, which produced evil for all Trojans  
And for himself, since he had no knowledge of the gods’ decrees.”<sup>1</sup>

1 Hom. Il. 5.60–64: Μηριόνης δὲ Φέρεκλον ἐνήρατο, Τέκτονος υἱὸν / Ἀρμονίδεω, ὃς χερσὶν ἐπίστατο δαίδαλα πάντα / τεύχειν· ἔξοχα γάρ μιν ἐφίλατο Παλλὰς Ἀθήνη ὃς καὶ Ἀλεξάνδρῳ τεκτῆναιτο νῆας εἰσας / ἀρχεκάκους, αἱ πᾶσι κακὸν Τρώεσσι γέγοντο / οἷ τ’ αὐτῷ, ἐπεὶ οὐ τι θεῶν ἐκ θέσφατα ἦδη.

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By designating Paris's ships "the beginning of evils" (*arkhēkakous*), the text employs a formulaic phrase and a recurrent narrative construct, whereby something that would normally seem innocent, even trivial, sets in motion a series of events that unfolds over time with consequences that prove momentous.<sup>2</sup> Thus, were it not for Harmonides's skill, these ships would have been less swift and seaworthy, such that Paris could not have abducted Helen. Menelaus, in turn, would not have had to seek her recovery or avenge the breach of guest-host relations; Agamemnon would not have assembled a great coalition to help his brother; the war at Troy would not have been fought; and Phereklos – the master shipwright's son – would not have died in the fighting, along with countless others. The causal chain goes further still, for the text traces Harmonides's skill to the exceptional (*exokha*) love Athene bore him, much as the passion between Helen and Paris resulted from Aphrodite's favor. Here, as elsewhere, the epic shows its sense that human affairs are inextricably entangled with and dependent on what the late Marshall Sahlins termed "metahuman" powers, a category that includes not only gods, but demons, spirits, ancestors, and personified abstractions.<sup>3</sup>

## II

Casting the Persian wars as comparable in scale and significance to those fought at Troy, Herodotus frequently alluded to scenes from the epic and occasionally made use of its formulaic language.<sup>4</sup> In this spirit, he gestured to the *Iliad*'s account of Harmonides when identifying the ultimate cause of the later conflict. Toward that end, he called attention to the events of 499 BCE – a decade before Darius's invasion – when Aristagoras of Miletus won Athenian support for the Ionian revolt he was organizing, after failing to secure such help from the Spartans.

"Coming before the people, Aristagoras said the same things he had said in Sparta about the rich booty to be won in Asia and how the Persians would be easy to conquer, as they customarily used neither shield, nor spear in battle. He also told them that the Milesians were originally colonists from Athens and it would be fitting for their more powerful brethren to rescue them. There was nothing he did not promise, until he swayed (*anapeise*) them. It seems easier to deceive (*diaballein*) many people rather than one, since Aristagoras failed to deceive (*diaballein*) Cleomenes the Spartan King, a lone individual, but he accomplished that feat with

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<sup>2</sup> Along these lines, see Leineieks 1974, 102–107; on the significance of the name Harmonides, which is built on the root *harmazō*, "to fit things together skillfully, to construct," Liović 2010, 9–10.

<sup>3</sup> Sahlins 2022.

<sup>4</sup> *Inter alia*, see the articles in Matijašić 2022.

thirty thousand Athenians. Having truly been misled (*anapeisthentes*), the Athenians voted to send twenty ships to aid the Ionians and they appointed Melanthios commander. These ships were the beginning of evils for Greeks and Barbarians.”<sup>5</sup>

Like Homer, Herodotus identified ships sailing east from Greece to Asia Minor that facilitated a seduction on the one hand, a sneak attack on the other as “the beginning of evils” (*arkhē kakōn*). In the event, Athenian troops borne by those twenty ships helped the Ionian rebels sack much of Sardis, the Persian satrapal capital, including the temple of its patron deity, a sacrilege that invited retribution. They failed to take the city’s citadel, however, where defenders barricaded themselves until reinforcements arrived, when the tide of battle turned abruptly. As the Ionians suffered heavy losses, the Athenians took to their ships and hurried home, rejecting their erstwhile comrades’ pleas for assistance.<sup>6</sup>

Homer looked beyond Paris’s ships to their maker and beyond Harmonides to the goddess Athene. In similar fashion, Herodotus identified Aristagoras – whose name literally means “best speaker in council” (*aristos* + *agoreuō*) – as the human agent responsible for the Athenian ships’ sailing and all that followed. The verbs used for the address he gave hold particular interest, as they provide critical commentary on the Milesian’s rhetorical skill and style. Thus, as Christopher Pelling observed, Herodotus employed the verb *dia-ballein* so consistently with reference to Aristagoras (twice in this passage and repeatedly elsewhere) that it becomes his very hallmark.<sup>7</sup> “What exactly, does *diaballein* mean?”, Pelling asked, then offered these observations.

“It is a difficult word: it receives seven pages in John Chadwick’s *Lexicographica Graeca*. It is normally translated by something like ‘trick,’ ‘deceive,’ ‘impose upon,’ ‘täuschen,’ ‘ingannare’ ... Sometimes it does involve deceit or at least disingenuousness (Themistocles

5 Hdt. 5.97: ἐπελθὼν δὲ ἐπὶ τὸν δῆμον ὁ Ἀρισταγόρης ταῦτα ἔλεγε τὰ καὶ ἐν τῇ Σπάρτῃ περὶ τῶν ἀγαθῶν τῶν ἐν τῇ Ἀσίῃ καὶ τοῦ πολέμου τοῦ Περσικοῦ, ὡς οὔτε ἀσπίδα οὔτε δόρυ νομίζουσι εὐπετέες τε χειρωθῆναι εἶησαν. ταῦτα τε δὴ ἔλεγε καὶ πρὸς τοῖσι τάδε, ὡς οἱ Μιλήσιοι τῶν Ἀθηναίων εἰσι ἄποικοι, καὶ οἰκός σφεας εἶη ρύεσθαι δυναμένους μέγα· καὶ οὐδὲν ὃ τι οὐκ ὑπίσχετο οἷα κάρτα δεόμενος, ἐς ὃ ἀνέπεισε σφέας. πολλοὺς γὰρ οἴκε εἶναι εὐπετέστερον διαβάλλειν ἢ ἕνα, εἰ Κλεομένηα μὲν τὸν Λακεδαιμόνιον μόνον οὐκ οἶός τε ἐγένετο διαβάλλειν, τρεῖς δὲ μυριάδας Ἀθηναίων ἐποίησε τοῦτο. Ἀθηναῖοι μὲν δὴ ἀναπεισθέντες ἐψηφίσαντο εἴκοσι νέας ἀποστεῖλαι βοηθοὺς Ἴωσι, στρατηγὸν ἀποδέξαντες αὐτῶν εἶναι Μελάνθιον ἄνδρα τῶν ἀστῶν ἔοντα τὰ πάντα δόκιμον· αὐταὶ δὲ αἱ νέες ἀρχὴ κακῶν ἐγένοντο Ἑλλησί τε καὶ βαρβάροισι.

6 Hdt. 5.103.1: μετὰ δὲ Ἀθηναῖοι μὲν τὸ παράπαν ἀπολιπόντες τοὺς Ἴωνας, ἐπικαλεομένου σφέας πολλὰ δι’ ἀγγέλων Ἀρισταγόρῳ, οὐκ ἔφασαν τιμωρήσειν σφι·

7 Pelling 2007, 179. For Herodotus’s use of *dia-ballein*, see Powell 1938, 86–87. Aristagoras is the subject of this verb three times (5.35.1, 5.50.2, 5.97.2). It is also used of other Greeks when they speak to or about the Persians (Hippias at 5.96.1, Histiaeus at 5.107.1, the Pisistratidae at 6.94.1, Lysagoras at 6.133.1), but is applied to no other speaker more than once.

at 8.110 or Artayctes at 9.116), sometimes a barefaced twisting of an underlying truth (Histiaeus at 5.107), sometimes as when Aristagoras addressed Cleomenes in Sparta (5.50), a rather different type of disquieting persuasiveness ... So *diaballein* in the active or middle voice is more complex than simply ‘trick.’ It basically seems to be to ‘throw words around’ (this may even be the force of the *dia-* prefix added to the verb *ballein*, ‘to throw’) ‘in such a way as to wrong someone’.”<sup>8</sup>

In addition to *dia-ballein*, the verb *ana-peithein* also occurs twice in the passage above: once in the active voice à propos of Aristagoras’ speech (where I have translated it as “swayed”) and once in the passive to describe its effect on the Athenians (where I translated “misled,” but “seduced,” “swayed,” and “beguiled” would be equally appropriate). While *peithein* denotes the act of persuading, Herodotus consistently added the preverb *ana-* to suggest either that persuasion was accomplished by dubious means (bribery, threats, deception), that those persuaded were led to undertake risky, morally questionable action (rebellion, usurpation, dissemblance, betrayal), or both, as in this case.<sup>9</sup>

Just as the Iliad presented Athene as the ultimate source of Harmonides’ skill and Paris’s ships, one so inclined could trace Aristagoras’s slippery rhetoric to a metahuman power. For any educated Greek would know it was the trickster god Hermes who first created “lies, seductive words, and a wily character,” which he placed in Pandora’s breast as part of Zeus’s plans for humanity.<sup>10</sup> Thereafter, deceptive speech is among the most effective weapons of the weak, but one that is dangerously effeminate and morally suspect. Whether Herodotus – or his readers – made this connection is far from obvious. At best, one might sense a subtextual allusion, not an explicit reference.

<sup>8</sup> Pelling 2007, 183–184 (slightly modified). It is perhaps of some tangential relevance to note that the Septuagint consistently used the agent noun derived from *dia-ballein*, *diabolos* (whence English “devil”), to translate “Satan,” identifying him as the deceitful, slanderous, misleading adversary of God and His chosen people, as in I Chronicles 21.1, Zechariah 3.1–2, and throughout the Book of Job.

<sup>9</sup> Herodotus uses *ana-peithein* for incitement to revolt at 1.123.2, 124.2, 125.1, 3.145.2, 5.97.2, 5.97.3, and 5.104.3; for bribery of the Delphic Oracle at 5.63.1, 5.66.1, 6.66.2, and 6.123.2; of other attempts to persuade by dubious means at 3.148.2, 8.5.1, 8.5.3, and 9.116.3; and of persuasion to undertake dishonest, risky, or profoundly misguided actions at 3.74.3, 6.23.2, 7.6.1, 8.143.1. See further the discussion of Tuci 2004.

<sup>10</sup> Hes. Op. 77–79: ἐν δ’ ἄρα οἱ στήθεσσι διάκτορος Ἀργειφόντης / ψεύδεά θ’ αἰμυλίου τε λόγους καὶ ἐπὶ κλοπῶν ἦθος / τεύξε Διὸς βουλῇσι βαρυκτύπου.

### III

It is considerably easier to understand that Persians saw metahuman forces behind Aristagoras's beguiling of the Athenians, since they theorized Truth and Falsehood as such. Not quite divine or demonic beings (although at times they verge on being so construed), but something on the order of transcendent absolutes that find instantiation in the people and events over and through whom they exercise power. From that perspective, Truth (Old Persian *arta*, Avestan *aša*) is not the result of true speech-acts, but their source and cause. The same holds true for the Lie (Old Persian *drauga*, Avestan *drug*), which prompts – and benefits from – the myriad falsehoods it puts in circulation (and here, it is worth noting that Babylonian versions of the Achaemenid inscriptions always translate *drauga* by *piršātu*, “lies” in the plural, rather than *piršu* in the singular).<sup>11</sup> In its pristine unity, Truth provided the basis for all moral, sociopolitical, and cosmic order, while the countless and ever-proliferating forms of the Lie were responsible for all divisiveness, confusion, disorder, and conflict.<sup>12</sup>

Herodotus wrote knowledgeably about Persian reverence for Truth, abhorrence of falsehood, and their view of Greeks as inveterate liars, threats not just to Achaemenid power, but to all that is right and holy.<sup>13</sup> And as Darius made clear in a text he circulated throughout the empire, it was the King's divinely-appointed responsibility to preserve Truth, establish order (restoring and maintaining it as necessary), suppress the Lie, and punish liars, especially those who incited rebellion.

“Proclaims Darius the king: These are the lands that became rebellious. The Lie made them rebellious so that these men lied to the people. Then the Wise Lord put them into my hand. As was my desire, so I did unto them. Proclaims Darius the king: You who may be king here later – protect yourself vigorously from the Lie! The man who is a liar, punish him so he is well-punished if you would think thus: ‘Let my land be secure.’”<sup>14</sup>

11 Gelb et al. 1956–2010, Vol. 12, 413–14.

12 Much has been written on this topic. *Inter alia*, see Bucci 1983, Cereti 2002, Skjærvø 2003, Haudry 2014, Nichols 2016, and Pompeo 2020.

13 Cf. Hdt. 1.136.2, 1.138.1, and 1.153.1. On his sources, see Lewis 1985, Sheldon 2002, Munson 2009, and David 2017.

14 DB §§ 54–55: *θāti Darāyavauš xšāyaθiya: dahyāva imā, tayā hamičiyā abava; draugadiš hamičiyā akunauš, taya imā kāram adurujiyaša; pasāvadiš Auramazdā manā dastayā akunauš; yaθā mām kāma, avaθādiš akunavam. θāti Darāyavauš xšāyaθiya: tuvam kā, xšāyaθiya haya aparam āhi, hacā draugā dṛšam patipayauvā, martiya, haya draujana ahati, avam ufraštam prsā, yadi avaθā, mani-yāhaj: “dahyāušmaj duruvā ahati.”* DB § 70 states that copies on parchment were circulated “in all the lands” (*vispadā antar dahyāva*). That a version in Aramaic was discovered at Elephantine suggests that some copies were translated into local vernaculars and it is possible Herodotus had direct or mediated access to a Greek version.

Such principles informed Darius's view of Aristagoras and the Ionian rebels, but Herodotus describes the Persian king as having been particularly offended by the Athenians, as he called on "Zeus" for success in taking vengeance and ordered a retainer to admonish him three times each day: "Sire, remember the Athenians!"<sup>15</sup> To appreciate why his wrath was so focused on Athens, it is useful to consider certain aspects of Persian religious ideology and some events in the years preceding Aristagoras's visit to Athens.

## IV

Although Persians condemned all forms of falsehood, they considered breach of a contract, compact, or treaty particularly abhorrent. Such agreements, denoted by the common noun *miθra*-, were regarded as solemn and binding.<sup>16</sup> These could be concluded between friends, business partners, family members, or groups of any size, including nations, and the larger their scale, the weightier were the consequences for any infringement.<sup>17</sup> Those who reneged on such commitments – termed "*miθra*-liars" (Avestan *miθrō.druj*-) – were among the greatest malefactors, since their mendacity threatened the world's peace, stability, and order. As the Avestan Hymn to *Miθra* puts it:<sup>18</sup>

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15 Hdt. 5.105.1–2: Λέγεται αὐτὸν... εἰρέσθαι οἵτινες εἶεν οἱ Ἀθηναῖοι, μετὰ δὲ πυθόμενον αἰτῆσαι τὸ τόξον, λαβόντα δὲ καὶ ἐπιθέντα οἷστὸν ἄνω πρὸς οὐρανὸν ἀπεῖναι, καὶ μιν ἐς τὸν ἡέρα βάλλοντα εἰπεῖν· ὦ Ζεῦ, ἐκγενέσθαι μοι Ἀθηναίους τείσασθαι, εἰπαντα δὲ ταῦτα προστάξαι ἐνὶ τῶν θεραπόντων δαίπνου προκειμένου αὐτῷ ἐς τρεῖς ἐκάστοτε εἰπεῖν· Δέσποτα, μέμνεο τῶν Ἀθηναίων.

16 On the meaning and significance of the term, see the classic article of Meillet 1907 and subsequent discussions, including Gershevitch 1959, 26–44, Kuiper 1961, Thieme 1975, Thieme 1978, 501–510, and Bucci 1978.

17 Yašt 10.116–17 lists eleven kinds of *miθra* in ascending order of their scale, assigning a numerical measure for the importance of each: 1. between friends in the same district (20x); 2. among members of the same community (30x); 3. between those of the same household (40x); 4. between husband and wife (50x); 5. among fellow students (60x); 6. between teacher and disciple (70x); 7. between son-in-law and father-in-law (80x); 8. between brothers (90x); 9. between father and son (100x); 10. between two countries (1000x); and 11. that which obtains within the Mazdayasnian religion (10,000x).

18 The Avestan hymn provides the fullest evidence regarding the deity and his enforcement of *miθra*-commitments. Good translations include Gershevitch 1959, Malandra 1983, 59–75, Pirart 2006, 103–159, and Lecoq 2016, 415–462. Epigraphic and onomastic evidence makes clear that *Miθra* was highly regarded among the Achaemenids but provides no comparable detail. Presumably, he was theorized in similar fashion. For the epigraphic evidence, see the invocations of *Miθra* by Artaxerxes II and Artaxerxes III (A<sup>2</sup>Sa § 2–3, A<sup>2</sup>Sd § 2, A<sup>2</sup>Ha § 2, A<sup>2</sup>Hb, A<sup>2</sup>Pa § 4); the onomastic evidence has been summarized and discussed by Schmitt 1978.

“The *miθra*-liar scoundrel  
 Destroys the whole land.  
 He strikes truthful people as hard as  
 A hundred sorcerers.  
 Do not break a *miθra*,  
 Not one you conclude with a liar,  
 Nor one with a truthful coreligionist.  
 A *miθra* is surely binding for you both:  
 Liar and truthful.”<sup>19</sup>

*Miθra*-commitments were enforced by the metahuman who embodied their binding power. Sleepless, he has a thousand ears, ten thousand eyes, and ten thousand omniscient spies, who help him watch for even the slightest infringement of a treaty, contract, or compact.<sup>20</sup> Beyond such unfailing vigilance, *Miθra* is described as a warrior with strength in his arms (*bāzuš.aojaṇhəm raθaēštqm*), a skull-crusher (*kamərəδō.janəm*), the strongest of deities (*aojišto yazatanqm*) who is best able to overcome resistance (*vərəθrajstəmō yazatanqm*), and he wields a hundred-headed mace, the most powerful of martial weapons (*amavastəməm zaēnqm*).<sup>21</sup> When anyone proves false to a solemn agreement, the deity’s vengeance falls not just upon the *miθra*-liar himself, but on the malefactor’s people.

“If someone should betray him –  
 A house-lord ruling over a household,  
 Or a village-lord ruling over a village,  
 Or a district-lord ruling over a district,  
 Or a nation-lord ruling over a nation –  
*Miθra*, angered at having been treated with enmity,  
 Comes forth to smash  
 The house, and the village,  
 And the district, and the nation.”<sup>22</sup>

19 Yašt 10.2: *mərəncaite vīspqm daiṇhaom / mairiō miθrō.druxš spitama / yaθa satəm kaiiaḡanqm / auuauuat aṡauua.jacit. / miθrəm mā janiīā spitama / mā yim druuatat pərəsajhe / mā yim xvādaēnāt aṡaonat / vaiīā zī asti miθrō / druuataēca aṡaonaēca*.

20 *Miθra*’s powers and systems of surveillance are repeatedly emphasized at Yašt 10.7, 24, 27, 45, 46, 60, 69, 82, 91, 141 and 143.

21 For descriptions of *Miθra*’s warrior might, see Yašt 10.25–27, 10.36–38, 10.43, 10.65, 10.96–98, 10.101, 10.135, 10.141; for his chariot and weaponry, Yašt 10.67–68, 10.96, 10.102, 10.112, 10.124–25, 10.128–32.

22 Yašt 10.18: *yezi vā.dīm aiβi.druzaiti / nmānahe vā nmanō.paitiš / vīsō vā vīspaitiš / zantāuš vā zantupaitiš / daiṇhāuš vā daiṇhupaitiš / fraša upa.sčandaieiiti / miθrō grantō upa.tbištō / uta nmānəm uta vīsəm / uta zantūm uta dahiiūm*.

Such ideas informed the way Persians understood Athenian participation in the sack of Sardis. For eight years earlier, at a moment when Athens felt vulnerable to Spartan attack, Cleisthenes, leader of the newly established democracy, sent a delegation to Sardis in quest of Persian support. The response they received was exactly what anyone familiar with Achaemenid practice – and Cleisthenes was surely such – could easily have anticipated.

“When the messengers arrived and conveyed the things they had been authorized to say, Artaphrenes, satrap of Sardis, asked them “What kind of men are you and what land do you inhabit that you should need to become allies of the Persians?” Having heard the messengers’ answer, he summarized things for them. If the Athenians would give earth and water to King Darius, he would conclude an alliance with them, and if they would not give these, he ordered them to depart. The messengers spoke among themselves, deciding on their own to give earth and water, planning for the alliance to be made. Upon returning home, they received heavy blame.”<sup>23</sup>

This scene has received considerable scholarly attention. Of particular interest is the way Herodotus provided latter-day Athenians multiple ways to deny that their ancestors’ attack on Sardis had violated any alliance or treaty. Thus, one could argue that the envoys exceeded their authority rendering any agreement they reached with Artaphrenes – Darius’s half-brother, whose name means “glory by virtue of Truth” (*\*Arta-farnah*)<sup>24</sup> – invalid, having never been ratified by the Assembly. More casuistically, one could observe that in principle an agreement might have been reached, but the alliance would have taken effect only when earth and water were actually delivered – not simply promised – and there is no evidence this was done.<sup>25</sup>

His coyness on these points notwithstanding, Herodotus did detail some important changes that took place between 507, when the emissaries called on Artaphrenes and 499, when Athenian ships helped sack his city. In the intervening years,

23 Hdt. 5.73.1: ἀπικομένων δὲ τῶν ἀγγέλων ἐς τὰς Σάρδεις καὶ λεγόντων τὰ ἐντεταλμένα, Ἀρταφρένης ὁ Ὑστάσπεος Σαρδίων ὑπαρχος ἐπειρώτα τίνες ἐόντες ἄνθρωποι καὶ κοῦγῆς οἰκημένοι δεοῖατο Περσέων σύμμαχοι γενεσθαι, πυθόμενος δὲ πρὸς τῶν ἀγγέλων ἀπεκορύφου σφι τάδε· εἰ μὲν διδοῦσι βασιλεῖ Δαρείῳ Ἀθηναῖοι γῆν τε καὶ ὕδωρ, ὃ δὲ συμμαχίην σφι συνετίθετο, εἰ δὲ μὴ διδοῦσι, ἀπαλλάσσεσθαι αὐτοὺς ἐκέλευε. οἱ δὲ ἄγγελοι ἐπὶ σφέων αὐτῶν βαλόμενοι διδόναι ἔφασαν, βουλόμενοι τὴν συμμαχίην ποιήσασθαι. οὗτοι μὲν δὴ ἀπελθόντες ἐς τὴν ἐσωτῶν αἰτίας μεγάλας εἶχον.

24 On the name and its significance, see Tavernier 2007, 294–295, Mayrhofer 2011, 116–117, and the literature cited therein. What is known of him from the ancient sources is summarized in Balcer 1993, 71–73.

25 *Inter alia* on this passage, see Schachermeyr 1973, Berthold 1986, Berthold 2002, Kramer 2004, Ruberto 2010, West 2011, and Rung 2015a.



the Spartan threat had receded; Athens had become more confident and powerful; the tyrant Hippias (r. 527–510), whom they expelled when forming the democracy, had taken refuge in Sardis, where he slandered (*dia-ballein*) Athens to Artaphrenes; who then pressed for the tyrant's restoration; an intervention the Athenians found so misguided and threatening that conflict with the Persians seemed inevitable.<sup>26</sup> Clearly, these developments prompted a dramatic change in Athenian policy, while Persian understanding of their relations remained constant. For as Louis Orlin first recognized, what Herodotus described as an “alliance” (*symmakhiē*), Persians would have considered a *miθra antarā dahyu*, i.e. a treaty between two nations and peoples.<sup>27</sup> As such it was a solemn, sacred commitment, irrevocably binding and enforceable through the metahuman power of Miθra, whose vengeance would fall on the *miθra*-liars, ensuring victory for the injured treaty-abiding people.

## V

From antiquity to the present, all who considered the question have understood that offering earth and water enacted submission to Persian power and incorporation within the Achaemenid empire. Less clear is why this particular practice played that role and what exactly it signified. Several able scholars have attempted to establish its religio-symbolic significance, but in the absence of direct testimony, the suggestions that have been offered tend to be based on comparanda of questionable value. Regrettably, this is true of Louis Orlin's appeal to theological con-

<sup>26</sup> The crucial passage again traces trouble to the corrosive influence of the Lie, using the verb *dia-ballein* for the deceptive discourse through which Hippias gained Artaphrenes's support.

“When Hippias came to Asia from Sparta, he set everything in motion, slandering (*diaballōn*) the Athenians to Artaphrenes and doing all he could so that the Athenians would come to be under him and Darius. Hippias did these very things and the Athenians, having learned of them, sent messengers to Sardis, imploring the Persians not to be persuaded by fugitives from Athens. And Artaphrenes bade them to take Hippias back if they wished to be safe. When this counsel was conveyed to them, the Athenians had none of it. And not having accepted this, it seemed they were openly enemies to the Persians” (Hdt. 5.96.1–2).

Ἰππίης δὲ ἐπεῖτε ἀπῆκετο ἐκ τῆς Λακεδαιμόνος ἐς τὴν Ἀσίην, πᾶν χρῆμα ἐκίνησε, διαβάλλων τε τοὺς Ἀθηναίους πρὸς τὸν Ἀρταφρένεα καὶ ποιέων ἅπαντα ὅπως αἱ Ἀθῆναι γενοίατο ὑπ’ ἐωυτῶ τε καὶ Δαρείῳ. Ἰππίης τε δὴ ταῦτα ἔπρησε, καὶ οἱ Ἀθηναῖοι πυθόμενοι ταῦτα πέμπουσι ἐς Σάρδεις ἀγγέλους, οὐκ ἔωντες τοὺς Πέρσας πείθεσθαι Ἀθηναίων τοῖσι φυγάσι. ὁ δὲ Ἀρταφρένης ἐκέλευε σφέας, εἰ βουλοίατο σοοὶ εἶναι, καταδέκεσθαι ὀπίσω Ἰππίην. οὐκὼν δὴ ἐνεδέκοντο τοὺς λόγους ἀποφερομένους οἱ Ἀθηναῖοι· οὐκ ἐνδεκομένοισι δὲ σφι ἐδέδοκτο ἐκ τοῦ φανεροῦ τοῖσι Πέρσῃσι πολεμίους εἶναι.

<sup>27</sup> Orlin 1976. On the differences between Greek and Persian understandings of what a treaty commitment would entail, with specific reference to this instance, see Beckman 2017, 219–222.

structs of the Younger Avesta,<sup>28</sup> Amélie Kuhrt's recourse to an episode reported in Faustus of Byzantium's 'History of Armenia' that took place eight centuries after Darius's reign (if it did so at all),<sup>29</sup> and Michael Munn's focus on Anatolian deities and cultic practice.<sup>30</sup> More secure is our understanding of the gesture's sociopolitical consequences, as recently summarized by Ela Filippone.

"The 'earth-and-water' formula, transmitted by Herodotus, had 'homeland, country (in a general sense)' as its referential meaning;

In Herodotus' storytelling, 'giving earth-and-water' should be intended as 'giving one's own country';

By giving earth-and-water to the king, a permanent 'ruler-subject' relation was established between the giver and the receiver. Some of the obligations were already implicit in the condition of subject (Old Persian *bandaka-*, rendered by *doûlos* 'slave' in Greek): lasting loyalty and obligation of military and material support in case of necessity.

Ideally, an earth-and-water giving people was considered as a part of the great Achaemenid oecumene."<sup>31</sup>

Particularly admirable in Filippone's account is the way she distinguishes three types of "earth" that figure in the proceedings: 1) the soil delivered to the Persian

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28 Orlin 1976, 265–266. In the Younger Avesta and later Zoroastrian texts, theologians established a homology between the six elements originally created by Ahura Mazdā and a set of six personified abstractions termed "Beneficent Immortals" (*Aməša Spəntas*). Within this construct, earth was taken to be the material instantiation of *Ārmaiti* ("Piety, Devotion"), water that of *Haurvatāt* ("Wholeness, Health"). There is, however, no evidence this system was part of Achaemenid ideology.

29 Kuhrt 1988, 98–99. The text she cited is Faustus of Byzantium's 'History of Armenia' 4.56, which tells how Šapur I tested an Armenian vassal by having him swear loyalty in a tent where, unbeknownst to him, Armenian soil and water had been strewn over half of the ground. If he spoke differently in different parts of the tent, that would prove his duplicity. While this story has common themes with the Achaemenid practice, it differs radically on a key point, describing an incident where the Sassanian king took earth and water surreptitiously and used them against a disloyal vassal, whereas Artaphrenes and Darius demanded that a supplicant consciously and willingly give earth and water, thereby becoming a loyal vassal. This was not an ordeal designed to test a supplicant, as Kuhrt would have it, but is better understood as a gift exchange, whereby one party offered material substances of a representative nature and received promise of protection and favorable treatment in return or, alternatively as a 'rite de passage' in which the status of a supplicant was transformed from alien-and-potential-enemy to member-in-good-standing-within-the-empire.

30 Munn 2009, 191–210. Munn argued that Lydian ideas about the goddess Kybebe influenced Persian associations of Anāhitā with flowing water and fertility of the land, which he took to stand behind the demands for earth and water. That the two deities share some features (as do many others) is unremarkable. More importantly, there is no evidence to suggest Anāhitā played a role in Achaemenid diplomatic negotiations.

31 Filippone 2023, 74 (slightly modified). In addition to the articles cited above, other contributions on this topic include Corcella 1993–1994, Nenci 2001, Waters 2014, and Rung 2015b.

king; 2) the land or country this gift represented; and 3) “the great Achaemenid oecumene” into which that land was incorporated. Each of these was denoted by a different lexeme in Old Persian, consideration of which can help clarify the way symbolic and material, human and metahuman concerns intersected in these ritualized prestations.

Following Filippone, let us begin with *\*zam*, which does not appear as an independent term in the limited corpus of Achaemenid inscriptions, but supplies the second element in the toponymic compounds *Uvāra-zmiya-* (Avestan *Xvāiri-zama*, “Chorasmia”) and *Uvāra-zmi-* (“Chorasmian”).<sup>32</sup> Derived from Indo-European *\*dh(e)ǵhom*, *\*zam* denotes “earth” in the sense of “ground, dirt, soil,” like its cognates: Avestan *zām*, Sanskrit *kṣām*, Greek *χθών*, Latin *humus*, Lithuanian *žemė*, Old Church Slavonic *zemlja*, and others.<sup>33</sup> It is the most concrete, most humble form of earth at issue, but along with water (Old Persian *ap*), it provides the basis for the sustenance, growth, and vitality of all life: plant, animal, and human.<sup>34</sup>

Second is Old Persian *dahyu*, which the trilingual inscriptions render by Babylonian *mātu* (regularly written as the Sumerogram KUR), whose primary sense is territorial: “land, country (as political unit).”<sup>35</sup> In contrast, the Elamite versions make use of a loanword whose plural occurrences – *da-a-yu-u-iš-pe* – bear a determinative element (the final *-pe*) reserved for animate beings, with the result that this denotes populations, not territories.<sup>36</sup> The consequent ambiguity, plus the complex relation of the Old Persian term to its Indo-Iranian cognates (Avestan *dahiiu-*, *dahhu* and Sanskrit *dāsyu-*) has sparked a certain amount of controversy.<sup>37</sup> Most notably, Pierre Lecoq argued that *dahyu* primarily refers to the people, population, and civil society of a given country,<sup>38</sup> while Rüdiger Schmitt insisted “daß altpers. /dahyu-/ ‘Land, usw.’ meint, nicht ‘Volk’.”<sup>39</sup> Both positions strike me as overstated and I would prefer to think the sense of *dahyu* as “land” extends to a bounded territory, a distinct ethnicity, and a polity whose degree of independence was contingent and renegotiable.<sup>40</sup>

32 Thus Tavernier 2007, 31–32, Szemerényi 1987–1991, Vol. IV, 1860–1861, and Schmitt 2014, 270.

33 For the etymology, see Pokorny 1959, 414–416, Schindler 1967, and Gamkrelidze – Ivanov 1995, 720; for the Avestan, Bartholomae 1904, 1662–1665.

34 This point has been aptly stressed by Tuplin 2011, 44.

35 Gelb et al. 1956–2010, Vol. 10, 414–421.

36 This point is stressed by Lecoq 1990, 132–133, citing Grillot – Roche 1987, 13–14.

37 On the relation of Old Persian *dahyu-* to Vedic *dāsyu-* “demon, enemy, barbarian,” see Mayrhofer, 1956–1976, Vol. 2, 28–29 and Benveniste 1969, 318–319.

38 Lecoq 1990.

39 Schmitt 1999, 452.

40 Here, it is helpful to note two points. First, although Elamite had terms for both “land” and “people,” none of these were considered adequate translations for a term that encompassed both

Beyond \**zam* (= soil) and *dahyu* (= land + people), a third term denoted “earth” as the entirety of the known world. This was *būmī*, which appears frequently in the Old Persian corpus, most often in the cosmogonic accounts that stand at the head of twenty-three inscriptions.

“A great god is the Wise Lord, who created this earth (*imam būmīm*), who created that sky, who created mankind, who created happiness for mankind, who made Darius king: one king over many, one commander over many.”<sup>41</sup>

Three points are worth making in the present context. First, it appears that water was implicitly understood as part of the earth at the time of its creation, since a Babylonian variant of this passage has the deity creating earth and water (*KI-ti ib-nu-ú u Ameš ib-nu-ú*), a move that resolves any possible misunderstanding, since the Sumerogram KI (which stands for Babylonian *eršetu*), unlike Old Persian *būmī*, denotes not just “the earth (in cosmic sense),” but also “dry land.”<sup>42</sup> The addition of *A<sup>mes</sup>* makes clear that water was also present.<sup>43</sup>

Second, all the original creations appear in the singular, unity being part of their primordial perfection. Subsequent fragmentation of earth (*būmīm*) and humanity (*martiyam*) into different lands-and-peoples (*dahyāva*, the plural of *dahyu*) results from the Lie’s corrosive effects, in response to which the Wise Lord took redressive action, charging the Achaemenid ruler with the task of restoring the world’s proper order.

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domains, with the result that Old Persian *dahyu* was adopted as a loanword. In contrast, the sense of Babylonian *mātu* was sufficiently broad to serve in place of *dahyu*. In addition to “country (as political unit), land (as against sea)” and “home country; native land,” “The Assyrian Dictionary” also lists multiple passages in which *mātu* denotes “population of a country” (Vol. 10, 420–421).

41 DNa § 1: *baga vazrka Auramazdā, haya imām būmīm adā, haya avam asmānam adā, haya martiyam adā, haya šiyātim adā martiyahyā, haya Dārayavaum xšāyaθiyam akunauš, aivam parūnām xšāyaθiyam, aivam parūnām framātāram*. The fullest study of this and other variants on the cosmogony remains Herrenschildt 1977.

42 The text in question is DPg § 1, which has recently been corrected by Delshad 2019. His translation reads as follows:

“Ahuramazdā (is) great, who (is) great over all gods, who created the heaven and the earth and created water. Who gave all prosperity and people to live on.”

*dū-ru-ma-az-da ra-bi šā ra-bu-ú uba muḥ-ḥi DINGIR<sup>mes</sup> gab-bi šā AN-e u KI-ti ib-nu-ú u A<sup>mes</sup> ib-nu-ú šā dum-qī gab-bi id-din-nu-ma ŪG<sup>mes</sup> ina lib-bi bal-tu’.*

On *eršetu*, see “The Assyrian Dictionary”, Vol. 4, 308–313. The passages in which it denotes “earth (in concrete sense), soil, ground, dry land” are listed at 312–313.

43 Cosmogonic accounts in the Avesta, including Yasna 19.2, 19.4, 19.8, 44.3–6, Vidaēuudāt 19.35, and Visprad 7.4, treat earth (*zqm*) and water (*āp*) as separate items that appear in close connection (usually first and second or second and third in the list of creations). In Yasna 5.1 and 37.1, where *būmī* is used to denote the earth, the connection to water is more distant (second and fifth in the list).

“Proclaims Darius the King: When the Wise Lord saw this earth (*imām būmīm*) seething in rebellion, then he bestowed it on me. He made me king.”<sup>44</sup>

“Proclaims Darius the King: When the Wise Lord made me king in this earth (*ahyāyā būmiyā*), by the Wise Lord’s will, I made all good.”<sup>45</sup>

Third, the identification of Darius as “one king over many” (*aivam parūnām xšāyaθi-yam*) sets up an extended homology predicated on the contrast of ideal Unity and a deeply flawed, contentious Multiplicity that yearns for restoration of the harmonious primordial ideal.<sup>46</sup>

One: Many ::

Truth (*arta*): Lie (*drauga*) ::

Earth (*būmī*): Lands (*dahyāva*) ::

One King (*aivam... xšāyaθiyam*): Many subjects (*parūnām*)

In his later inscriptions, Darius adopted “King in this earth” (*xšāyaθiya ahyāyā būmiyā*), then “King in this great, far-reaching earth” (*xšāyaθiya ahyāyā būmiyā vazr̥kāyā dūraḡ apī*) as the culminating item in his list of royal titles and on one occasion he went so far as to name himself “King in all the earth” (*xšāyaθiya haruvahyāyā būmiyā*).<sup>47</sup> As Clarisse Herrens Schmidt recognized nearly a half century ago, with these titles the Achaemenids settled on *būmī* as the way to describe the

44 DNa § 4: *θāti Dārayavauš xšāyaθiya: Auramazdā, yaθā avaina imām būmīm yaudantīm, pasāva-dim manā frābara; mām xšāyaθiyam akunauš.*

45 DSi § 2: *θāti Dārayavauš Xš yaθā AM mām Xšyam akunauš ahyāyā BUyā vašnā AMha visam naibam akunavam.*

46 The phrase “one king over many, one commander over many” is not found in Darius’s earlier inscriptions, but is added to the cosmogonic account in the later ones – DNa § 1, DSe § 1, DSf § 1, DE § 1, DZc § 1 – and is adopted by his successors, recurring in XPa, § 1, XPb § 1, XPe § 1, XPd § 1, XPf § 1, XPh § 1, XE § 1, XV § 1, A<sup>1</sup>Pa § 1, D<sup>2</sup>Ha § 1, A<sup>2</sup>Hc § 1, and A<sup>3</sup>Pa § 1.

47 “King in this earth” occurs at DSd § 1, DSf § 1, DSg § 1, DSi § 1, DSy § 1 and in the inscriptions of Darius II, Artaxerxes II, and Artaxerxes III; Darius shifted to “King in this great, far-reaching earth” at DSe § 2, DE § 2, DNa § 1, DZc § 2, and this is the form consistently adopted by Xerxes. “King in this great earth” appears at DZb § 1, DSab § 1 and “King in all the earth” at DSb § 1. In all these formulae, *būmī* occurs in the locative and not the genitive, subtly signaling that the divinely ordained ruler is at work restoring order within a still-troubled world, but has not yet established his rule over its entirety (for which the genitive would be appropriate). Also significant is Darius’s shift from naming himself “King of lands-and-peoples” (*xšāyaθiya dahyūnām*: DB § 1, DPa § 1, DPh § 1, DH § 1, DSa § 1, DSd § 1, DSf § 1, DSg § 1, DSi § 1, DSk § 1, DSm § 1, Dsy § 1) to “King of lands-and-peoples, of which there are many” (*xšāyaθiya dahyūnām tayaīšām parūnām*: DPe § 1), “King of lands-and-peoples of many races” (*xšāyaθiya dahyūnām paruzanānām*: DE § 2), and “King of lands-and-peoples of all races” (*xšāyaθiya dahyūnām vispazanānām*: DNa § 2, DSe § 2, DZc § 2).

unprecedentedly large, powerful, and ambitious sociopolitical entity they had constructed.<sup>48</sup> In contrast to our term “empire,” their usage had a distinctly aspirational aspect, signaling a wish to restore the ideal unity of “this earth” (*imam būmīm*) as the Wise Lord created it, toward which end it was necessary to champion Truth and overcome the Lie. The list of lands-and-people (*dahyāva*) that had been incorporated into the empire (*būmī* with its novel semantics) provided a measure of the progress they had made toward fulfilling that ambition.<sup>49</sup>

At this point, we can begin to perceive how the three different forms of “earth” related to one another in the request Artaphrenes and other Achaemenid officials made on behalf of the Great King:

- Giving soil (*zam*) and Water (*ap*)
- represented the decision of a land-and-people (*dahyu*)
- to accept incorporation within the Persian empire (*būmī*)
- helping to restore the unity of this earth (*imam būmīm*)
- consistent with the original intentions and ongoing desire of the Wise Lord (*Auramazdā*)
- after which, any attempt to reverse this decision
- would represent the breach of a binding commitment (*miθra*)
- under influence of the Lie (*drauga*)

Considered from the perspective of this religiously grounded imperial ideology, the ships that helped sack Sardis not only revealed the Athenians to be *miθra*-liars, it set back the project of world-restoration, producing disorder, conflict, unhappiness, and untruth, provoking Miθra’s wrath, the Wise Lord’s sorrow, and making it necessary for the Achaemenid ruler to set things right. For the beginning of evils was not just those ships, but – as always – the corrosive, metahuman force of the Lie.

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<sup>48</sup> Herrenschmidt 1976. Further on the global aspirations of Achaemenid ideology, see Rollinger – Degen 2021.

<sup>49</sup> Lists of *dahyāva* under Achaemenid rule appear at DB § 6 (dated 521 BCE), DPe § 2 (between 515 and 512), DSm § 2 (date uncertain), DSe § 3 (512), and DNa § 3 (after 512). In all cases, the list of royal titles precedes, but only in DSe § 2 and DNa § 2 is Darius named “King in this great, far-reaching *būmī*”. The highest title listed in the other inscriptions is “King of lands-and-peoples” (DB § 1 and DSm § 1: *xšāyaθiya dahyūnām*), “King of lands-and-peoples, of which there are many” (DPe § 1: *xšāyaθiya dahyūnām tayaīšām parūnām*).

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