To What Extent does Herodotus' Histories Indicate the Achaemenid Persian Empire's Success in Administration and Organization?

Xuanming Zhao

Shanghai American School, Lingbai Road, Shanghai, China
xuanming01pd2023@saschina.org

Abstract: Herodotus' Histories is one of the first works of history (Momigliano) and serves as a record of the ethnic groups, cultures, and events from around the Mediterranean and in West Asia and North Africa from mythological antiquity to around the Greco-Persian Wars. Because it is founded on the tradition of oral storytelling, bias, myth, misinformation, and judgment are apparent throughout. Therefore, this paper aims to examine Herodotus' rhetoric and evaluate to what extent the Achaemenid Persian Empire was successful, as indicated by his description. This is done by analyzing the flaws and biases in Herodotus' writing and then analyzing the Achaemenid system of governance, physical infrastructure, and failures in the Ionian Revolt. The paper concludes that although Herodotus highlights the shortcomings of Persian administrators, the overall competence of the regime seen in the descriptions outweighs its flaws.

Keywords: ancient history, histories, Achaemenid Persian Empire

1. Introduction

Much glory is given to those who conquered and found empires; Alexander the Great, Genghis Khan, and Tamerlane, for example, are all lauded for their military prowess and easy creation of empires. However, it is the maintenance and administration of an empire after its conquest: the assertion of power, implementation of infrastructure, and consolidation of rule, that help these empires stand the test of time and gain the degree of cultural and economic influence that lend them true historical significance and make them successful.

Among the empires that proved successful in both conquest and stably ruling its diverse nations and vast territories, one of the most enduring was the Achaemenid Empire, which was founded by Cyrus II the Great in 550 BC and persisted through the strife presented by the Ionian Revolt and the Greco-Persian Wars until it collapsed under Darius III in 330 BC. The phenomenon of intercultural mingling, conflicting nationalities, and war is an inevitable consequence of empire, and those of the Achaemenid Persians were captured in an incredibly vivid snapshot in Greek historian Herodotus' Histories, which gives an account of the rise of the Persian empire until the events after the Greco-Persian Wars. Analysis of Herodotus' narratives while understanding his bias provides insight into the Persian methods and innovations in the imperial administration, which, as will be argued in this paper, made the Achaemenid Empire ultimately successful despite its several failures as manifested in revolts and rebellions.

2. Understanding Herodotus' Biases

Despite Histories' breadth and clarity, Herodotus' fondness for and tendency toward relaying oral storytelling and regional mythology leads to bias, hyperbole, and falsehood [1]. Understanding this is necessary to undertake an analysis of any other content. Depictions of "other" cultures and nations in the book are often based on hearsay: in describing Scythian custom and the Scythian creation myth, for example, Herodotus gives the testimony of "Greek dwellers in Pontus", the "Peloponnesians", and the Scythian themselves [2].

Although Herodotus presents himself as simply a relayer of history through his narrative style and considers the variety and validity of these perspectives, he is also a passer of judgment, showing his work's inherent bias. When describing Babylonian religious tradition, Herodotus says their custom is "foul" [2]. This bias reveals potential flaws in the quality of his information because it indicates that he views Babylonian customs with disgust. Descriptions of it would therefore be vulnerable to harmful, even slanderous diction and potential oversight of details and information as he has shown he is unwilling to explore the nuance in Babylonian ritual. By passing judgment on the actions and values of certain people, his belief bias and in-group bias shape his language and word choice to make things appear more or less attractive, which could compromise his descriptions and reduce the amount and accuracy of the information that he passes on. As throughout Histories, any judgment made is a product of his Greek moral standards. In this case, the consequence may be that description may not be authentic to this ritual's positive role and reception in Babylonian society. As a result, scholars' knowledge of Babylonian custom is impeded, and Herodotus' views disproportionately shape the study of Babylonian culture. Later, when contemplating the Scythian's creation myth, he says, "for my part, I do not believe the tale" [2]. The word of Herodotus, who is often given the lofty title of the "father of history", could cause the readers to deride the Scythian people's mythical tradition when taken at face value and thereby negatively affects the quality of his information. Therefore, Herodotus' writing includes and is vulnerable to his personal biases derived from his Greek cultural identity and his potentially faulty critical judgment.

Furthermore, Histories suffer from the excessive embellishment of achievements that impede their ability to confer an accurate representation of the Greeks or the Persian Empire. When giving an account of the Battle of Thermopylae, Herodotus says this: "Of this (it is my belief) Leonidas bethought himself, and desired that the Spartans alone should have the glory; wherefore he chose rather send the allies away than that the departure of those who went should be the unseemly outcome of divided counsels" [2]. He inserts his assumption about Leonidas and indirectly passes judgment on the significance of martial glory in Spartan culture and Leonidas' leadership and character. Whether Herodotus includes this because of his stance on Sparta or Persia or as a mere storyteller passing on the local word of the people he visited, it shows that his narrative is vulnerable to hyperbole.

This raises the question of the extent to which the achievements, wealth, and competence of the Achaemenid Persians are accurately depicted; since Herodotus primarily relied on Greek sources, the enmity between Greek and Persian could have distorted Greek accounts of the Persian Empire and thereby created a bias in Herodotus' narrative and modern understanding of the workings of the Persian Empire [3].

3. Achaemenid Administration and Infrastructure According to Herodotus

However, Herodotus does deliver a detailed outline of the Persian Empire's administration, some components of which, like roads, infrastructure, cooptation, and delegation of rule, significantly contributed to the empire's endurance and successful rule over the multitudes of different nations it

conquered. Legitimacy within conquered regions was previously established by evoking religious legitimacy, as Cyrus II did in Babylonia, claiming his reign was ordained by Marduk, or by securing marriage alliances and demonstrating acceptance of local culture by counting regnal years using the local calendar as Cambyses did when he first conquered Egypt [4].

The main Achaemenid innovation in governance Herodotus described was satrapy. This was an administrative province governed by a Persian-appointed bureaucrat, which enabled the Persian government to consolidate its regime over nations that otherwise were stubbornly nationalistic [5,6]. Egypt, which took pride in being "the oldest nation on earth" and the sole lawmakers among men, was brought under control when Darius I placed the people of "Libya, Cyrene, and Barca" alongside the Egyptians in their satrapy, which humbled them by forcing intermingling and association and made them subject to Persian authority [2]. Here, by creating "twenty governments" and ordaining each "nation", which he, the Persian authority, defined, Darius created national solidarity and a Persian identity to streamline administration and eliminate nationalistic sentiment that could be problematic and lead to a revolt. "Hence came seven hundred talents" from his newly made province of Egypt, which Darius was able to wring a steady stream of tax from which he could use to supply his military and fund further conquest [2].

Herodotus depicts the success of the Persian Empire and corroborates it with a statistic whose veracity is unknown. He has distorted and invented figures to enrich his storytelling before, as seen in his telling of the 300 of Thermopylae: he says that he has learned the names of the 300 heroes but does not list them. Listing things out is a tendency that was clear in other parts of the work, like when he names the nations assimilated under the Persians [7]. Despite any doubt about the amount of money that Herodotus said the Persians claimed in tax, he does make the Persian Empire's political infrastructure and bureaucracy apparent in Histories through his description of satrapies and governments. Political scientist Francis Fukuyama attributes government ability, legitimacy, and political development to the establishment of a bureaucracy [8]. According to Herodotus, the Achaemenid Empire certainly did that, which means it was set up to be successful.

Herodotus also notes the scale and significance of Persian roads: "All along it is the king's stages and exceeding good hostelries, and the whole of it passes through the country that is inhabited and safe" [2]. Physical infrastructure was one of the most significant challenges to administrating the empire. Roads connected all of Persia's territories, provided safe travel to people who stimulated the economy through trade, and allowed armies to travel along and quell revolt or conquer [9]. Xerxes himself was able to use the road to cross the River Halys once, where "[only] by great ingenuity and an expert knowledge of geography can a traveler […] not cross the Halys twice after crossing it once" [10]. The Royal Road provided travelers with the most efficient, the easiest route across rivers, which were often dilemmas barring ferries or bridges that exacted tolls; this shows its significance in increasing economic, military, and royal traffic.

Furthermore, Herodotus emphasizes the luxury and security of the road system. He notes that the inns, which are significant factors of ancient travel, are "exceedingly good". This demonstrates his approval of the Persian road system from the perspective of a traveler who would be provided for and could rest comfortably. With the significant role roads play in imperial administration and the high praise that Herodotus lavished on the quality of the Royal Road and its amenities, the organizational success of the Persian Empire is made clear in this regard.

4.   The Failure in Administration

Not all was well about the Achaemenid government in Herodotus' writings. Bureaucratic success in Egypt was not mirrored in places like Ionia, which chafed under Persian satraps and Persian rule due to a cultural desire for freedom from tyranny and perhaps also economic decline under Persian rule to forced exports and exploitation of resources [11]. Herodotus gives the outstanding stock to

the administrative shortcomings here; after all, Histories was meant to serve as a chronicle of the Greco-Persian War, and this was its inciting incident.

Herodotus points out the flaw of appointing a ruler in Persia's stead: it was not guaranteed that the satrap would be competent or kind or otherwise be able to maintain legitimacy and authority. A lack of cooptation in Ionia further deepened existing historical enmity between Persia and Ionia when rulers like Lycaretus were put in place, who "strove to enslave and subdue all the people" [2].

This was a failure in administration because a government cannot function without internal legitimacy granted by the people, even when the government in question is not a democracy. Tyrants and satraps are also given a problematic amount of autonomy. When Aristagoras, a Persia-backed tyrant, formulated a plan to capture the island of Naxos and secured the backing of a more powerful satrap, he was permitted to lead the expedition.

Herodotus attributes the failure of this expedition to the discontent caused by Aristagoras' presumptions and attitudes towards his subordinates and allies being the appointed tyrant. When he commanded Megabytes, an ally, to "obey" him, Megabytes became discontent and consequently was able to tip the Naxians off about the invasion. They were able to defend their island as a result. However apocryphal this tale is, Herodotus tells about a failure in imperial administration: giving Aristagoras, a tyrant of dubious character, too much military autonomy led to internal dissent in the military and the failure of the Naxos expedition. This eventually erupted in the Ionian Revolt, incredibly destabilizing Persian authority in Ionia and eventually snowballing into an entire regional recession of Persian influence.

5.   Conclusion

Even with all the flaws in Herodotus' Histories, one can see the administrative innovations and methods of governance that made the Achaemenid Persian empire so successful. New methods of governance enabled the consolidation of different nationalistic and ethnic groups, effective and safe road systems were built, and taxation was made possible and efficient through satrapies. However, the same delegating rule system led to governance failures, as seen in the Ionian Revolt, which was ostensibly due to giving individual rulers too much power.

Herodotus clarifies the Achaemenid Persian Empire's successes but does not overlook its failures. Despite his tendency to judge history and culture in many places throughout Histories, Herodotus does not make any final judgment of the Persian administration per se. However, his writing shows the overall efficiency, administrative capacity, and, therefore, the empire's success. This is because the most significant fault of the Achaemenids identified, the disastrous Naxos Expedition and the consequent Ionian Revolt, is not due to systemic corruption or incompetence but rather individual error.

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