

## **‘Your shooting is divine, my lord’: Kambyses at Hdt. 3.35**

(c. 34) ‘Prexaspes, what sort of man do the Persians say I am?’

‘Master, they have nothing but good to say about you, except in one respect: they say that you are rather too fond of wine.’

(c. 35) ‘You’ll see whether the Persians are telling the truth’, he said, ‘or whether in saying this they are out of their minds. There’s your son, standing on the porch. I’ll shoot at him, and if I hit him right in the heart, that will be proof that the Persians are talking nonsense, whereas if I miss, you can say that the Persians are right and that I am out of my mind.’

With these words he drew his bow and shot the boy with an arrow. The boy fell to the ground and Cambyses ordered his men to slit him open and examine the wound. When it was found that the arrow had pierced his heart, he turned to the boy’s father with a laugh and said delightedly, ‘So there you have it, Prexaspes! This proves that I am quite sane, and the Persians are out of their minds. Now tell me, do you know anyone else in the world who can shoot an arrow with such accuracy?’

Prexaspes saw that he was quite mad and was afraid for himself. ‘Master, he said, ‘I don’t think that even the god could have made such a good shot.’

[tr. Robin Waterfield]

In the light of a recent article by Roger Beck,<sup>1</sup> the words Herodotos attributed to Prexaspes may have been truer than he knew. On the basis of a large terracotta krater with moulded decoration recently found in a Mithraeum in Mainz,<sup>2</sup> Beck ascribes a central role in the cult of Mithras to an initiation ceremony in which a seated elder (representing the god himself?) shoots—or rather, more probably, appears to shoot, in a ‘Scheintod’—a boy advancing towards him, escorted by an older male *mystagogos*. The visual scenario is strikingly similar to that presented by Herodotos; especially since the Persian King is normally represented enthroned, and might therefore have been imagined to have targeted his vizier’s son from a seated position in any case.

In other words, it looks as though behind Herodotos’ story lies a misunderstood iconic representation of a Persian religious ritual.<sup>3</sup>

Nor may the distance in time be a problem, if Jonathan Z Smith is right to claim

‘In almost no case, when treating this period [i. e. the early Christian era], do we study a new religion. Rather, almost every religious tradition that forms the object of our research has had a centuries-old history. We study archaic Mediterranean religions in their Late Antique phases’.<sup>4</sup>

### 26.1.01

<sup>1</sup>‘Ritual, Myth, doctrine, and Initiation in the Mysteries of Mithras: new evidence from a cult vessel’, *JRS* 90 (2000) 145–80.

<sup>2</sup>see Beck’s Plate XIII.

<sup>3</sup>One does not have to go all the way with Robert Graves to feel that this approach sometimes offers valuable interpretative possibilities. Prexaspes’ lengthy ‘genealogising’ at 3.75 looks, for example, like a refraction of some kind of ritual recitation accompanying the inauguration, or reinstatement, of the Persian King’s reign. And see Asheri on the immediately following (!) 3.35.5 for the suggestion that the ‘inverted burial’, if that is what it is, is another uncomprehended ritual. Misprision of alien sculptural iconography has often been assumed by critics, as at e. g. 2.107 (Pharaoh tramples his enemies) or 3.88 (the equestrian statue commemorating Oibares).

<sup>4</sup>*Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (Chicago 1990) 107, quoted by Beck, p. 176.