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To what extent do the available sources give us a comprehensive and reliable outlook on the relationship between Greeks and Persians around the time of the Persian Wars (525-449 BCE)?

To answer this complicated question, we first have to understand what we mean by a 'comprehensive and reliable outlook'. Each source has its own way of conveying to us the information which it holds, either due to its format (plays or physical objects) or by the way in which it has been written. The most renowned source concerning this is Herodotus. Known as being the 'Father of History' and acknowledged as the first historian, Herodotus is the most prominent source on this time period. However, he has been accused as the 'Father of Lies' and that he makes up stories to fill in gaps in the history he is not clear about. However, this is just a grave misunderstanding. 'History' (from the Greek word ἱστορία) literally means 'enquiry' or 'investigation'. This is slightly different from our concept of history today, which follows from Thucydides' approach to recording history. It is important to understand the difference between the two. Herodotus' method is to find everything out about an event from all sorts of sources, however ludicrous and unreliable. He then presents all of these accounts to the reader, and allows the reader to make up his/her mind. Thucydides on the other hand, will find out everything about the event, but hunts for the truth until he finds it. Only when he has found out the exact details will he share them with the reader. One could easily argue that Thucydides' approach is much more sensible and efficient. However, his approach misses one crucial aspect which is vital to History, even today: context. As a result of Herodotus including all sorts of wild and fantastic tales at the time of an event, the reader can see what exactly was going on in people's minds at the time, and it also allows the reader to have an insight into any political propaganda going on at the time. One great example of this is with the army of Xerxes. Herodotus says that he was told the army was a little over 5 million people in size (including support units). Seeing this is more than the population of the whole of Europe at the time, one can conclude with some safety that this is an exaggeration, and that perhaps the person who told Herodotus had been won over by the Persian propaganda. I will discuss Herodotus and Thucydides respectively later on, but it is important that we understand how different sources present us with their outlooks, whether they are comprehensive and reliable or not.

However, it is important we realise the cultural and historical background of Persia in order to better understand their relationship with the Greeks. It was in 550 BCE that the Persians began to make a name for themselves. Led by Cyrus the Great, they began to conquer their neighbours, such as Babylonia, Egypt and Lydia. Within about 30 years the empire stretched from the Himalayas to Ionia (modern day western Turkey), Egypt to Scythia (modern day southern Ukraine). It is known as the Achaemenid Empire to distinguish from later empires in Persia such as the Parthian and Sassanian ones. The Achaemenids were the household of the Persian Kings such as Cyrus, Darius and Xerxes (equivalent to the Tudors, for example). One of the reasons the Persians were so successful was because they adopted and respected other cultures. Domains such as Babylonia or Egypt had political and religious legacies dating to around 3000 years beforehand. As a result, if Cyrus was to win over these domains, he had to respect their customs. He was gifted so well in this form of diplomacy that the Egyptians even made him a Pharaoh. One could easily think therefore that the Achaemenid Empire was slightly patchy and weak, with no unified religion or people. However, there were surprisingly few revolts. Only one revolt around this time is significant, which occurred in 521 with the ascension

of Darius I to the throne. This was because there was a dispute for the throne, involving an apparent imposter which Darius is said to have killed, although the details are unconvincing. However, these revolts were completely settled later on with the arrival of Xerxes, Darius I's son, to the throne.

To control such a large empire, the King had a set of governors, known as *satraps* who were each in charge of a *satrapy* or a province such as Babylonia, which had its provincial centre in Babylon, where taxes were collected and the *satrap* dwelled. It is important that we compare this to the Greek's approach to government. It is vital that one understands that Greece was not a unified country or empire, but a series of city states, the most famous and powerful (at this time) of which were Sparta and Athens. Furthermore, not all Greek cities were against the Persians. In fact, most of northern Greece, including Thessaly, Etolia and Achaia were neutral to the Persian rule. It was really only Athens, Sparta and Thebes who opposed the Persians in a major way. Therefore, when one refers to 'Greece' or the 'Greeks' in this context, one must remember that we are talking about a select few of the city states. In terms of government, Athens was a democracy, Sparta was ruled by two Kings (oligopoly of sorts) and Thebes was an oligopoly also at this time.

One of the most important cultural pillars with any society is its religion. The Persians were not polytheists, but believed in a single god, known as Ahuramazda. It is said that Ahuramazda once approached a man known as Zoroaster in a vision at a watering well. As a result, this religion is known as Zoroastrianism, or Mazdeism. There are three main tenets associated with Zoroastrianism: Good thoughts, Good deeds and Good words. This meant that it's followers were firm believers in the truth (*arta*) and feared Lies (*draugr*) which was believed to be the chaotic force trying to destroy the world and the peace within. In Persepolis, the grand palace of Darius I, one of the many royal inscriptions states thus: '*A great god is Ahuramazda who created this excellent work which one sees; who created happiness for man; who bestowed wisdom and energy upon Darius the king...*' Following this, the inscription records what Darius I says concerning himself. He says, '*I am not friend of the man who is a follower of the Lie*' and '*I control my impulses firmly*' and '*He who does harm, him I punish according to the damage*' This inscription gives us a great insight into the views of the Persian rule. They seek the truth, they are well tempered, and strive for peace.

One might argue that forming a huge empire is not an action which is peaceful. However, at the time the Near and Middle East was in absolute chaos, under the Assyrian monarchs. Most peoples were suppressed and brutalised. Cyrus was different in the sense that he was more diplomatic when taking over a people, allowing them to keep their religion and sometimes their government, as long as they gave men to the Persians in times of conflict, or tax in times of peace. The reason the Graeco – Persian wars started was due to the Ionic uprising which started in 499 BCE and lasted to 493 BCE. In the Persian's eyes, Ionia had done harm, and so had the Greek cities supporting them which included Athens, Naxos and Eretria. Therefore they had to be punished, and so the war began.

But before this, as Herodotus explains the Persian custom, the King must decide on his heir. However, there was a dispute. Darius had two wives, and with the former he had four children, the eldest being Artabazanes, and with the latter, three children, the eldest being Xerxes. Both claimed to be Darius' heir. Stuck in this dilemma, the king was advised by Demaratus, an exile from Sparta, who informed the king what would happen in Sparta. That is, Artabanus was born before Darius was king, and that Xerxes was born once Darius was King, therefore Xerxes should be pronounced as his heir. The fact that Darius accepted this custom (of his soon to be enemy) and uses it when dealing with such an important and traditional matter is a telling statement. It is clear from this that the Persians respect the mind-set and culture of the enemy, and are prepared to accept it. However, it is important to consider whether the Spartans or Athenians would accept a Persian custom such as this if they were in such a dilemma. I think not. This is perhaps a good insight into the attitudes towards war of both parties, East and West. It seems to me that the Persians are much more respectful of other nations compared to the Greeks, whom are unnecessarily arrogant to the Persian culture and people as a whole.

The attitude of the Athenians towards the Persians is perfectly captured in Book 8 of Herodotus, when a Spartan envoy carry the message that Persia wishes to form a truce with them. The Athenians say in reply to the envoys that, *'There is not so much gold in the world nor land so fair that we would take it for pay to join the common enemy and bring Greece into subjection.'* The meaning of this is fairly self-explanatory, but it must be noted that the Athenians describe Persia as 'the common' enemy for references later on.

After Darius' reign of 36 years came to an end in 486 BCE, Xerxes succeeded him as planned. He then holds a debate concerning the invasion of Greece, with Mardonius, another Greek exile, advising him in favour of the motion. He is said to have reminded the king the following: *'The Athenians have done us great injury, and it is only right that they should be punished for their crimes.'* The fact that Mardonius uses this argument first conveys how important justice is to the Persians, which ties closely into the ideals of Zoroastrianism: truth is always to be sought and justice to be served. However, it is important to consider the biases within this debate. Mardonius is greedy to be a governor of Greece, and so this may impair his judgement. He may just be saying whatever the king needs to hear in order to be persuaded to invade. Therefore, we have to take Mardonius' views with a pinch of salt. It is clear though that the Persians prioritise the punishment of the Athenians over the expansion of their empire. Xerxes then confirms this by saying, *'I will not rest until I have taken Athens and burnt it to the ground, in revenge for the injury which the Athenians without provocation once did to me and my father.'* It seems that Xerxes is convinced. Mardonius goes on to inform the King about an aspect of the Greek nature that is fighting among themselves. He states that the Greeks are *'pugnacious'*, and that they fight *'on the spur of the moment'*. Mardonius also remarks at how it is surprising that if there is a quarrel between two Greek peoples, that they resort to fighting straight away, instead of resorting to negotiations, especially since both sides speak the same language. This adds to our

image that it is really the Greeks who are violent and uncivilised, fighting amongst themselves, instead of being united like the East.

Artabanus, Xerxes' uncle, then carries the opposing motion of the debate, not to invade Greece. He informs the king that the '*Greeks are great fighters*', and speaks about how this was proved at the Battle of Marathon. The main point I wish to draw from this is the fact that a counter argument has to be heard is a mark of a balanced and fair debate, a sign of a civilised and wise council. This image does not match up to the Greek images of Persians, but it is quite the opposite.

The points which were raised in Artabanus' debate crop up later on before the Battle of Thermopylae. Xerxes talks to one of his advisers, Demaratus, who is informing him about the motivation for the Spartans to fight, when so heavily outnumbered. Xerxes is puzzled at the idea of the Spartans fighting against such odds without a master to whip them forward or to command them to stand their ground. However, Demaratus says, '*They are free – yes – but not entirely free; for they have a master, and that master is Law.*' He goes on to say how the Spartans fear this Law much more than Xerxes' subjects fear him, and that whatever their master commands, they do, whether it be to stay in formation, conquer or die. In response to this the overconfident Xerxes just laughs and sends Demaratus away. This episode within Herodotus raises an interesting point of comparison between the Western and Eastern cultures, Law (νομος) and Monarchy. Xerxes simply cannot understand how the Spartans can be commanded by a non-physical form. Since Xerxes laughs, almost treating this idea of Law as a joke, we can see how strange and foreign he believes this to be, and therefore how different these cultures really are.

With all of these episodes from Herodotus, as I said in my introduction, we must make up our own minds concerning how truthful we believe the details to be. Perhaps Xerxes didn't laugh unknowingly, but actually completely understood the idea of Law, we will never know. Instead, we get the depiction of the story that Herodotus wants to tell us, whether that be for the truth, or simply for entertainment. Thus, we are seeing the history from a Greek's view, and this calls for caution when thinking about the source's provenance.

The next source to approach is rather fittingly Thucydides, said to be Herodotus' successor in terms of history, who wrote primarily on the Peloponnesian Wars (431 – 404 BCE.) Thucydides records history in what we would call the 'normal' fashion (i.e. how history is recorded nowadays), as I explained in the introduction. He gives an interesting account on a man called Pausanias, a Spartan general. Pausanias was regarded very highly by all Greeks for defeating Mardonius at the Battle of Plataea in 479 BCE, but is said to have taken this high opinion of himself much further, to the point where he tried to defect to the Persians. Thucydides tells us how '*he was dressed in Persian fashion, he was accompanied*

by a bodyguard of Persians and Egyptians, and he had Persian food served at his table.' When they heard this, the Spartans recalled him at once. At first, they lacked sufficient evidence that he was defecting to the Persians, but one of his messengers he used to communicate with Xerxes revealed a letter stating Pausanias' true intentions (to help give Greece to Persia and in return to be allowed the hand of the King's daughter in marriage) but he fled to a temple, where they starved him out so he later died outside the temple. It is important to realise that even after the so called defeat of the Persians at Plataea in 479 BCE, the Persians were still ambitious for Greece. The fact that a Spartan general, a man familiar to hardship and discomfort, was drawn in by Persian luxury and power is quite interesting. It shows that the Persian lifestyle was sought after and perhaps admired by Greeks, even though they would have to hide their passions in secret, so not to reach a fate similar to Pausanias'. One might wonder that if, hypothetically, Greece and Persia weren't locked in conflict, how many Greeks would adopt the Persian way of living?

Another source which gives us a great insight to the relationship between the Greeks and Persians from a Greek point of view is plays. The most obvious is *The Persians* by Aeschylus produced in 472 BCE. In this tragedy, Atossa (wife of Darius and mother to Xerxes) waits in Susa, one of the royal Persian capitals, for news of Xerxes' expedition in Greece. A messenger arrives, announcing the Persian defeat at Salamis, but also that Xerxes is making his way back home. Atossa then summons Darius' ghost, and he then prophesises another Persian defeat at Plataea (479 BCE.) Xerxes then arrives back home in rags, and laments for the rest of the play how great a defeat they have suffered. There is one small episode within this play which is very important. It is a conversation between the Chorus and Atossa, where the latter is finding questioning the former about the Athenians. Atossa asks, *'Are bows and sharp arrows prominent in their hands?'* to which the chorus replies, *'Not at all: they use spears to stand and fight, and carry shields in heavy armour.'* Here Aeschylus may be implying that the Persians do not *'stand and fight'* but instead run like cowards. He presents the Persians in such a way to please the Greek audience. Furthermore, Aeschylus presents a contrast between the weapons used on both sides. Persians favour the bow, whereas the Greeks favour the spear. The Greeks believed the bow was a cowardly weapon (most notably used by Paris the Trojan Prince in the Iliad) whereas to the Persians it was a weapon of precision and skill.

Later, Atossa then asks who the master of their people (the Athenians) is, to which the Chorus replies, *'They call themselves no man's slaves or subjects.'* Atossa is shocked by this, and then asks, *'So how would they withstand enemies who come against them?'* to which the Chorus replies *'Well enough to destroy Darius' great and splendid army!'* Again Aeschylus is presenting the Persians in such a light to please the audience. He is implying that they are naïve and overconfident, and stressing the freedom and fighting spirit of the Greeks: *'no man's slaves or subjects.'*

As a Greek who fought in Marathon (and maybe even Salamis, although we are not sure) Aeschylus would certainly have been biased towards the Greeks in his play, and would have tried to present the Persians to be as evil, but very powerful so to amplify the Greek victory, therefore to give a burst of patriotism to the audience. In a way Aeschylus is mythologizing the history, perhaps echoing the Western and Eastern clash of the Iliad 1000 years or so beforehand, to make his own modern Athenian epic.

Another play produced around 50 years later is Aristophanes' *Knights*. Even though it is 50 years after the battle of Plataea and defeat of the Persians, it still holds some interesting references to the East and its culture. One such reference is to fashion. Ancient fashion is arguably a less well known area of the Ancient world at this time, but a stage direction in 'The Knights' reads: [*The doors open wide, and The people appears rejuvenated, wearing a linen tunic of the type fashionable at the time of the Persian War, his hair bound up with a golden grasshopper brooch*] We can conclude, piecing this together with Thucydides' account on Pausanias and his dress, that fashion was prominent in the Ancient World at this time. With Pausanias however, Persian fashion gave a much higher status, and therefore we get the impression that he was trying to appear exotic and cultured perhaps. This is similar to the idea of modern day people bringing back art from foreign countries, not only because they like it, but it makes them appear cultured, travelled and therefore knowledgeable.

Another interesting aspect which arises in 'The Knights' is how Persia is considered as the evil enemy in the background. In an argument between the Paphlagonian (antagonist) and the Sausage-seller (protagonist) the former accuses the Sausage-seller of making 'a deal with the King of Persia'. In the context this is an accusation of plotting against Athens and its people. It seems to me that Aristophanes is using this accusation much like people today use the accusation of 'making a deal with the devil'. The devil is an entity on which one can blame anything bad, whether it be a minor or major occurrence. Perhaps at the time of this play in 424 BCE people would have used the King of Persia as an entity of similar purpose. A modern day example of this is found within Nazi Germany's treatment of the Jewish people. Hitler and Goebbels would produce all sorts of slanderous propaganda attacking the Jewish people, blaming them for World War 1, the decline in the German economy etc. However, we all know that this was completely false, and that the Jewish people were completely innocent. Could the same be happening here between the King of Persia and the Greeks? As a result of being defeated the Persians were subject to propaganda of sorts, such as Aeschylus' *Persians* and at a much lesser level in Aristophanes' 'The Knights'.

Another type of source we haven't yet considered is archaeology. Archaeology can give us a great insight on the day to day life and opinions of a culture. Concerning the question in hand, the best archaeological artefact would be the Eurymedon Vase (see Figure 1) for its sheer frankness and simplicity. The vase dates back to around 460 BCE, (20 years after the defeat of the Persians at the Battle of Plataea) and is an Attic red-figure oenochoe (wine jug). It depicts a Greek with phallus in hand, approaching a prostrate Persian. Along with a kylix (drinking cup – Figure 2.) of similar age and design which depicts a Greek warrior overcoming

a Persian warrior, these two artefacts clearly send a message; that Greece overcame Persia. The simplicity and crudeness of these depictions shows us perhaps how proud the Greeks were about their defeat of the Persians. Again, this is a type of Greek propaganda to show how pathetic and effeminate (especially in the Eurymedon Vase) the Persians were to perhaps make Greeks feel even more patriotic and proud to be Greek.

We have now seen a wide variety of sources, two historical, two theatrical and two archaeological which have helped us piece together the details of the relationship between the two great Western and Eastern powers, Greece and Persia. It seems that the opinion of the Persians differs. Herodotus, our main source, seems to respect the wealth and luxury of the Persian Empire, whereas the two playwrights, especially Aeschylus, seem not to. As I stated in the introduction, it is imperative that we recognise the loyalties of sources, as well as who they were aimed at.

The available sources do indeed give us a comprehensive outlook on the relationship. This relationship is fairly simple, two parties disagree and/or dislike one another, and therefore they fight. The sources therefore have a fairly easy job at presenting this relationship and therefore we have an easy time understanding it.

The reliability of the sources is another matter. Herodotus' way of presenting history is unique, as I explained above. However, he along with Thucydides are Greek, and so they both have the potential to be biased. Aeschylus and Aristophanes are both Greek also, along with the archaeological evidence found. It is a one-sided tale. Seeing almost all of our prominent sources for this time are Greek, we have no counter argument from any Eastern sources to disagree with the Greek sources. It is crucial to realise that the Persians only recorded taxes and land, and therefore do not have their own accounts of history like the Greeks. We are therefore almost forced to believe everything the Greek sources tell us. One therefore has to conclude that the available sources do not give us a reliable outlook, as they are only from the point of view of one party. As a result of this, I believe the Persians may have been treated and thought of as worse than they actually were, and they never had a voice to say otherwise. It is sad to think that because of this the Persians will always be thought of as the first 'evil empire'.



Figure 1. Eurymedon vase



Figure 2. Attic red figure kylix ca. 460 BCE

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