

# CUSTOMS OF THE PERSIANS

about 430 B.C.

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*Herodotus*

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The Greek historian Herodotus (484?–425? B.C.) spent decades of his life writing an account of the great wars that had taken place between the Greeks and the Persians between 499 and 479 B.C. In addition to explaining the background and course of the wars, his *History* also describes the Persian empire and Persian customs and traditions, as the following excerpt illustrates. Historians today believe that Herodotus drew on the work of earlier historians as well as his own observations from his extensive travels throughout Greece, Persia, and North Africa. Herodotus is often referred to as the father of history.

**THINK THROUGH HISTORY: Forming and Supporting Opinions**

Do you think that the Greek historian Herodotus shows any bias against the Persians? Use examples to support your opinion.

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The customs which I know the Persians to observe are the following. They have no images of the gods, no temples nor altars, and consider the use of them a sign of folly. This comes, I think, from their not believing the gods to have the same nature with men, as the Greeks imagine. Their wont, however, is to ascend to the summits of the loftiest mountains and there to offer sacrifice to Zeus [= Ahura-Mazda<sup>1</sup>], which is the name they give to the whole circuit of the firmament.

To these gods the Persians offer sacrifice in the following manner: they raise no altar, light no fire, pour no libations; there is no sound of the flute, no putting on of chaplets, no consecrated barley cake; but the man who wishes to sacrifice brings his victim to a spot of ground which is free from pollution, and then calls upon the name of the god to whom he intends to offer. It is usual to have the turban encircled with a wreath, most commonly of myrtle. The sacrificer is not allowed to pray for blessings on himself alone, but he prays for the welfare of the king and of the whole Persian people, among whom he is of necessity included. He cuts the victim in pieces, and having boiled the flesh, he lays it out upon the tenderest herbage he can find, trefoil especially. When all is ready, one of the Magi<sup>2</sup> comes forward and chants a hymn, which they say recounts the origin of the gods. It is not lawful to offer a sacrifice unless there is a Magus present. After waiting a short time the sacrificer carries the flesh of the victim away with him, and makes whatever use of it he may please.

It is also their general practice to deliberate upon affairs of weight when they are drunk; and then on the morrow, when they are sober, the decision to which

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1. **Ahura Mazda:** Persian god of truth and light

2. **Magi (Magus, sing.):** Persian priests

they came the night before is put before them by the master of the house in which it was made; and if it is then approved of, they act upon it; if not, they set it aside. Sometimes, however, they are sober at their first deliberation, but in this case they always reconsider the matter under the influence of wine.

When they meet each other in the street, you may know if the persons meeting are of equal rank by the following token: if they are, instead of speaking, they kiss each other on the lips. In the case where one is a little inferior to the other, the kiss is given on the cheek; where the difference of rank is great, the inferior prostrates himself upon the ground. Of nations, they honor most their nearest neighbors, whom they esteem next to themselves; those who live beyond these they honor in the second degree; and so with the remainder, the further they are removed, the less the esteem in which they hold them. The reason is, that they look upon themselves as very greatly superior in all respects to the rest of mankind, regarding others as approaching in excellence in proportion as they dwell nearer to them; whence it comes to pass that those who are the farthest off must be the most degraded of mankind.

There is no nation which so readily adopts foreign customs as the Persians. (This was the greatest weakness of the Persians, and the chief cause of their decline.) Thus, they have taken the dress of the Medes,<sup>3</sup> considering it superior to their own; and in war they wear the Egyptian breastplate. As soon as they hear of any luxury, they instantly make it their own. Each of them has several wives, and a still larger number of concubines.

Next to prowess in arms, it is regarded as the greatest proof of manly excellence, to be the father of many sons. Every year the king sends rich gifts to the man who can show the largest number; for they hold that number is strength. Their sons are carefully instructed from their fifth to their twentieth year, in three things alone,—to ride, to draw the bow, and to speak the truth. Until their fifth year they are not allowed to come into the sight of their father, but pass their lives with the women. This is done that, if the child die young, the father may not be afflicted by its loss.

To my mind it is a wise rule, as also is the following—that the king shall not put any one to death for a single fault, and that none of the Persians shall visit a single fault in a slave with any extreme penalty; but in every case the services of the offender shall be set against his misdoings; and if the latter be found to outweigh the former, the aggrieved party shall then proceed to punishment.

They hold it unlawful to talk of anything which it is unlawful to do. The most disgraceful thing in the world, they think, is to tell a lie, the next worse to owe a debt, because among other reasons, the debtor is obliged to tell lies.

**Source:** Excerpt from *Histories* by Herodotus, Book I, translated by George Rawlinson, in *Readings in Ancient History*, Volume 1, edited by William Stearns Davis (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1912), pp. 58–60.

3. **Medes:** inhabitants of Media (now northern Iran)