

WHO IS PYTHIUS THE LYDIAN?¹

Abstract. Pythius the Lydian, host to Xerxes at Celainai in Herodotus 7, has previously been identified as the grandson of Croesus, but this identification has not been fully explored. This note first examines the figure of Pythius and his origins in the text of Herodotus. Although Pythius becomes a mythical figure in later writers such as Plutarch, Herodotus has deliberately created a coherent family line, despite his very disparate sources in the legend of Atys and story of Pythius' son's death. Secondly, the implications of Pythius' identity in his encounters with Xerxes are discussed: Pythius embodies the hard-learned wisdom of the Mermnads, and of Xerxes' predecessors, that no one can combat fate. It is ironic that Xerxes' final encounter before the invasion of Europe, revealing both his great generosity and his great cruelty, should be with a man who has himself learnt the workings of fate, but whose actions Xerxes cannot imitate.

Pythius the Lydian, who appears in Herodotus Book 7 in two episodes with King Xerxes, is a familiar figure. When Xerxes arrives at Celainai, Pythius, a man of great wealth, entertains the king and the whole army, and offers his fortune for the war. Xerxes, delighted with his support, refuses the offer, and instead increases Pythius' fortune with a gift of seven thousand darics (27-30). Subsequently, frightened by an ominous eclipse and emboldened by Xerxes' favour, Pythius requests that the oldest of his five sons be left at home to comfort his old age. Xerxes is infuriated by the implication that his expedition will fail, and, as ruthless as he was previously generous, has the son killed, and marches his army away to Europe between the two halves of his body (38-9).

The story of Pythius has been well examined in the past. It forms a clear parallel with the story of Oiobazus (4.84), in which Oiobazus, a prominent Persian, also requests exemption for one son from Darius, and finds his three sons killed as a response. The relevance of the Pythius episode to the characterisation of Xerxes and the theme of tyranny has been shown, and the incident also placed in its context of purification ritual, similar to Macedonian practice.² There is, however, a further aspect of the story which has received less attention.

¹ I thank the *Histos* team for suggestions, which are mentioned, without prejudice, in the foot-notes.

² Purification ritual: J. A. S. Evans, 'The story of Pythius', *LCM* 13 (1988) 139; other comments: H. R. Immerwahr, *Form and Thought in Herodotus* (Cleveland 1966) 182; D. Lateiner, *The Historical Method of Herodotus* (Toronto 1989) 154; K. H. Waters, *Herodotus on Tyrants and Despots: a study in objectivity* (*Historia* Supplement 15; Wiesbaden 1971) 75.

The fact that Pythius, son of Atys, is very probably meant to be identified as the grandson of Croesus, last king of Lydia, who had a son called Atys, was first noticed in 1856, and is mentioned in most commentaries.³ Yet the implications of this identification have not yet been fully drawn out. The intention of this note is modest: to examine the identification, and to demonstrate the effects of this identification on our understanding of the episode more explicitly than has previously been done.

Although Pythius' descent from Croesus is not stated in the text, there are many pointers to indicate his Mermnad ancestry. Pythius is the most prominent Lydian of his time, as one might expect of the family of a deposed king, and is a man of legendary wealth, second only to the Great King himself. He is identified to Xerxes as the man who presented the famed golden plane tree and golden vine to Darius (27.2). His name, with its Delphic allusion, is appropriate to the immediate family of Croesus, benefactor of Delphi and initially misinterpreter of, but eventually learner from, the god of Delphi; and his age (he describes himself as aged at 38.3) would be appropriate to a child born around 550; he would be seventy in 480 at the time of the invasion.⁴ His position, as a member of a deposed ruling house, still influential in his country under Persian rule, is paralleled by that of Myrsus son of Gyges, who appears in books 3 and 5. This latter carries a traditional royal name, and appears first as messenger sent by Oroites, governor of Sardis, to Polycrates in Samos (3.122), and later as a commander in the Persian army during the Ionian Revolt (5.121).⁵ The Persians are said to make a habit of 'treating the sons of kings with honour', and even restoring the sons of kings who have rebelled (3.15); clearly the family of Croesus has not been reduced to humility, since Pythius has retained both wealth and social position.

³ L. Uhrlichs, 'Über die älteste samische Kunstlerschule', *Rheinisches Museum* 10 (1856) 1-29, 26-7; R. W. Macan, *Herodotus: the seventh, eighth and ninth books* vol.i (London 1908) 41; W. W. How and J. Wells, *A Commentary on Herodotus* vol.ii (Oxford 1912) 138. D. Gera, 'Bereaved fathers in Herodotus', *SCI* 12 (1993) 36-50, rejects the identification because Herodotus does not draw attention to it explicitly (48 n. 43), but see J. Gould, *Herodotus* (London 1989) 45-6.

⁴ Herodotus tells us that Croesus grieved for two years after Atys' death, then began his preparations for the campaign against Persia (1.46), going to war c. 547. Some commentators make Pythios rather older: 'between 70 and 80' (How and Wells); '80 in 480' (Macan, quoting from Stein (ed.), *Herodotus* (Berlin 1893)). The significant name 'Pythius' (on which more in n. 13) should therefore be added to the useful list in T. Harrison, 'Herodotus' Conception of Foreign Languages', *Histos* 2 (1998) 37 n. 144.

⁵ See Lombardo, 'Erodoto storico dei Lidi', in W. Burkert and G. Nenci (eds), *Hérodote et les peuples non-grecs: neuf exposés* (Geneva 1990) 171-203, 180.

It does not seem problematic to accept the historicity of Pythius. Yet some aspects of the story should give us pause. The eclipse, for instance, which in Herodotus' story provides the catalyst for Pythius' foreboding and request to Xerxes, is not a historical one; there was no eclipse visible at Sardis in spring 480.⁶ The story is thus 'free-floating', and very much a moralising type: both Pythius and Oiobazus can perceive the likely outcome of the expeditions of Xerxes and Darius respectively, and are punished by tyrannical rulers for expressing a lack of faith. In later sources the Herodotean story is joined with two others around the figure of 'Pythes' or 'Pytheas': Pythes was the governor of a city, whose inordinate desire for gold was cured by his wife, in a Midas-type fable. After the death of his sons Pythes grew tired of life, and retired to a mausoleum constructed on an island in the middle of a river, leaving control of civic affairs to his wife.⁷ But although there has been a translation of the story subsequent to Herodotus into a moralising type, this need not imply that there was no historical figure in the beginning. One can see a similarity with Herodotus' treatment of the previous generation of Mermnads, Croesus' son Atys.

In his Lydian *logos* in the first book, Herodotus includes an account of the death of Atys at the hands of his protector Adrastus (1.34-43). The story is clearly derived from the myth of Attis, the Phrygian god; the whole Croesus-logos is constructed from Greek story-elements in a timeless way, to create a 'morality play' (as the presence of Solon demonstrates), and the Atys myth has been added to this in Greek tragic form.⁸ Atys is the valued son of Croesus, about whom he dreamed that he would be killed by an iron weapon. Croesus attempted to protect his son from this fate, but was unable to resist his request to participate in an expedition to hunt a monstrous boar in Mysia. Croesus sent with his son his *xenos* Adrastos, to whom he had offered asylum after he was exiled for the accidental killing of his brother, with orders to protect Atys, but when the boar was tracked down it was Adrastos

⁶ P.-E. Legrand, *Herodotus: Histoires VII* (Paris 1951) 66, 68; How and Wells ii 145; F. R. Stephenson, 'Records of Eclipses in Greek and Roman Historians and other Classical Authors', forthcoming in *Histos*.

⁷ Plutarch *Moralia* 262D-63C; Pliny *Naturalis Historia* 33.10; Seneca *De Ira* 3.16; Polyaeus *Strategemata* 8.42. Pliny and Seneca relate the Herodotean story, Polyaeus only that of Pythes' wife (named as Pythopolis). W. Aly, *Volksmarchen, Sage und Novelle bei Herodot und seine Zeitgenossen* (Gottingen 1921) 171-2 notes the similarity between Herodotus' story of the wealthy man who offers the King his fortune and is rewarded, and story 76 in *The Thousand and One Nights* ('The Kalif El-Hakim and the Merchant').

⁸ M. Miller, 'The Herodotean Croesus', *Klio* 41 (1963) 58-94; H.-P. Stahl, 'Herodots Gyges-Tragodie', *Hermes* 96 (1968) 385-400; J. Moles, 'Herodotus warns the Athenians', *PLLS* 9 (1996) 259-84 at 264-5.

himself who accidentally struck Atys with his spear and killed him. Adrastus (whose name means ‘inescapable’) then killed himself in remorse.

This is a reworking of the myth of the vegetation god Attis, but with one important difference. At first sight, the Atys of Herodotus 1 does not have children, which is not surprising, given the form of the Attis myth from which his story derives. Attis, like Adonis or Tammuz, is the beloved of the mother goddess, cut down at the moment of his ripeness. The myth is reported in several forms, but all agree on a central theme of infertility. Pausanias (7.17.9-10) gives a Phrygian version of the myth, which makes Attis the son of Calaus of Phrygia and a eunuch from birth, who becomes the favourite of Cybele in Lydia, and consequently attracts the jealousy of Zeus. Zeus sends a boar to Lydia, which kills a number of youths, Attis among them. The account recorded from Pessinus (7.17.10-12) is more complex: Attis is the offspring of a hermaphrodite being, Agdistis, conceived indirectly through Agdistis’ severed male genitals. In adulthood, Attis is about to be married to the king’s daughter in Pessinus, but on his wedding day is driven mad by Agdistis, and castrates himself. A third form of the myth appears in Ovid *Fasti*, in which Attis dedicates himself to the cult of Cybele, promising to remain a *puer* forever, but forgets his vow with a nymph, and so is driven mad by Cybele and castrates himself.⁹ In all of these forms, Attis is ‘unripe’, unable to attain manhood through marriage and procreation. Herodotus bases his account on the Phrygian form of the myth, but casts it (or uses a source which cast it) in a very Greek form, centring his account on Adrastus, the outcast who is offered hospitality and unwittingly becomes the murderer of his host’s son.

Herodotus’ account, however, does leave room for the creation of Pythius, apparently deliberately. The first part of the narrative relates Croesus’ dream, and his immediate concern to marry off his son, so as to spare him from military service and possible danger from iron weapons.¹⁰ At 1.35, while Croesus is organising the wedding, Adrastus arrives and is offered asylum. The request for the disposal of the boar arrives ‘at about the same time’, and at this point (1.36) Atys is newly married; when he protests against exclusion from the hunt at 1.37.3, it is at being shamed before his new bride. There is a clear temporal slide here, unusual for a tragic setting, from Atys about to be

⁹ Ovid *Fasti* 4.223-242. So also Catullus 63 reflects the version of the myth attributed to Pessinus.

¹⁰ J. A. Arieti, *Discourses on the First Book of Herodotus* (Lanham, Md 1995), 44 points out that marriage should not in itself bar Atys from the army, and might instead be intended to produce an heir as soon as possible, but this may be too literal a reading. True to their name, the *Histos* team see in 1.34 and 36 a certain ‘honeymoon humour’ (enhanced by incongruous application to an Attis): the youth is to be distracted by sex; in the event, the newly wed wife demands manliness of a different kind (1.37).

married to Atys married; the gap created in the narrative allows Pythius to be conceived, if not born. We can believe that Croesus did have a son Atys (which is after all a traditional name: in his genealogy of the Lydian kings at 1.7, Herodotus refers to Lydus son of Atys as the eponymous ancestor of the Lydians, and at 1.95 a story is assigned to the reign of the same Atys son of Manes), and that Atys had a son Pythius, without taking the stories themselves as historical; they use the family of Croesus as the focus for a sequence of moralising tales.

What bearing, then, does this have on Pythius' role in his encounter with Xerxes? Herodotus supplies clear signals to alert us to his ancestry - along with Xerxes we find out about him on his first appearance (7.27). At this point in the narrative Pythius, like Oiobazus, functions as a gatekeeper: Xerxes has to encounter him on his way out of Asia, and he offers the last opportunity to see Xerxes with his subjects, and to expose Xerxes' virtues and faults.

In the first encounter, Pythius stands to Xerxes as Croesus did to Cyrus in Book 1, once he had learnt the lesson of the mutability of fortune. Pythius acts with humility and generosity towards his ruler, and Xerxes responds with corresponding appreciation. Pythius approaches Xerxes as the most dutiful of his subjects, and offers his wealth to the king. This mirrors Croesus' action at the sack of Sardis in 1.88. The first piece of advice Croesus offers to his captor Cyrus concerns the pillaging of the city by the Persian troops. Cyrus says that the soldiers are plundering Croesus' treasures, but Croesus points out that these things are no longer his: the soldiers are stealing Cyrus' property, and he tells Cyrus how to prevent the pillaging without causing resentment among the army. This renunciation of property to a more powerful king is what Pythius is later to do, this time unprompted by misfortune. In this context, Xerxes' response to Pythius seems very pointed: 'Possess what you have gained in prosperity, and have the good sense always to be as you have shown yourself today'. This is indeed the lesson learnt by Croesus and his family, but it is advice which Xerxes himself is incapable of taking - he cannot be content with his own empire or his enormous wealth, nor can he retain his magnanimous attitude."¹¹

¹¹ Compare the Greek response to the Persian invasion at 9.82, and 7.102; how can Xerxes desire the conquest of Greece when he has so much, and Greece has so little to offer? The *Histos* team suggest that the first encounter between Pythius and Xerxes interacts also with the encounter between Solon and Croesus (1.30-33), with both parallels (lavish *xenia*, offer of wealth, ranking of 'first', 'second', etc., question of '(self-)sufficiency', debate/choice before fatal decision) and contrasts (the very rich Pythius is the philosopher figure, who offers to give it all up, the even richer king the visitor), creating rich implications.

In the second episode, Pythius' ancestry again has relevance. The eclipse first causes Xerxes concern, as a bad omen for the departure of the army, but he is reassured by the favourable interpretation offered by the Magi. Pythius, on the other hand, is *καταρρωδήσας* by the eclipse, and is seen to be more closely attuned to the omen. His very name, for the Greeks, suggests the correctness of his interpretation, and, given the Mermnad experience of misinterpreted oracles, it is poignant that he should be able to understand the inevitable end, and yet cause damage to himself in trying to avert its effects. It was of course Croesus who commented on the folly of war, since in peacetime sons bury their fathers, while in war fathers bury sons (1.87).

Pythius' role as Tragic Warner to Xerxes thus becomes more profound; if Xerxes will not accept advice from this man, once of a family of kings, and now his subject, from whom will he accept it? Xerxes' excessive cruelty, and refusal to accept that he has made a mistake, in the moment that he leaves for Europe, become the final example of refusal to learn through suffering. The reader has already seen in the *logoi* of the Lydian and Persian kings that fate is inescapable (*ἀδραστος*): the initial crime of Gyges' usurpation of the throne has been visited on his descendants through their own mistakes, and the desire to enlarge one's empire or exalt one's status beyond its proper bounds is an occasion for divine retribution. The pattern has been demonstrated first by Croesus, then by Cyrus and Darius.¹² Xerxes has been warned of the dangers of the Greek campaign, specifically in comparison with Darius (7.10.a-d), but cannot be swayed. His refusal to accept the true interpretation of the omens, and his tyrannical treatment of his subjects, are

¹² Croesus: 1.71, 90-1; Cyrus: 1.205-8, 211-14; Darius: 4.83, 130-4. On the symbolism of crossing rivers to carry out an ill-advised campaign, J. Gould, *Herodotus* (London 1989) 107-9.

his last acts of pride. When Xerxes returns across to Asia it will be running from disaster in Book 9. Pythius, after all, will be right.¹³

School of History and Archaeology, Cardiff University

SIAN LEWIS

¹³ The *Histos* team hazard some further points: ‘Pythius’ is also a significant name in suggesting *πυνθάνομαι* (hence *μανθάνω* and the like), cf. the juxtaposition at 7.37.3 and 38.1 (where Xerxes ‘learns’ the erroneous Magian interpretation of the eclipse and *Pythius* divines its true meaning - the ‘eclipse’ of Xerxes’ expedition). Indeed, a connection with *πυνθάνομαι* was a standard Greek etymology of *Pytho* and cognates: H. Frisk, *Griechisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch* (Heidelberg, 1973) II.622; J. C. Kamerbeek, *The Plays of Sophocles Part IV: The Oedipus Tyrannus* (Leiden 1967) 43 (excellent note on *OT* 70-71, 603, citing other convincing passages). Further, the story of Pythius (~ Delphi/Apollo) is immediately preceded by allusion to *Apollo*’s punishment of Marsyas (7.26.3), culminates with the barbarous punishment of *Pythius*’ eldest son, and contains the fictitious eclipse (n. 6), which raises the question of the intent of ‘the god’ (to Greeks naturally *Apollo*), and, thus contextualised, has great interpretative significance. Hence Xerxes, ‘destroyer’ like *Apollo*, will himself suffer ‘destruction’ because of his failure to decode moral and religious lessons propounded by *Apollo* or his representatives. But also, ‘Pythius’ himself has some learning to do: his request to Xerxes to allow his eldest son to remain with him repeats not only the mistake of *Oiobazus* but also that of *Croesus*: the very actions both take to save their sons from the fulfilment of an oracle ensure its disastrous fulfilment (note the verbal parallel between *καταρρωδήσας* at 7.38.1 and 1.34). There is learning and learning: *Pythius* initially handles Xerxes well, then fatally misjudges the capriciousness of a tyrant: we, Herodotus’ readers, may learn better.