

The Persian Debate on Government
Herodotus: *The History*, Book III. 80-86

3.80 Five days later, when the commotion had subsided, the men who had revolted against the Magi consulted with one another about the whole state of affairs. Now there are some Greeks who do not believe the following speeches took place at all, but they most certainly did.

[2] Otanes encouraged them to place the government in the hands of all the Persians, saying, "I think it best that we no longer be ruled by one of ourselves as a monarch, since that kind of government is neither pleasant nor good. You have seen the hubris [ὕβρις] of Cambyses, and you have all experienced the hubris of the Magus directly. [3] How could monarchy be a harmonious and coherent system when it permits the ruler to do whatever he wishes, to be accountable to no one? Even the best of men, if placed in this position of power, would lose his normal mental balance, for hubris [ὕβρις] will grow within him as he enjoys all the good things at hand, as will envy, too, which is always a fundamental part of human nature. [4] All evil lies in these two traits, and he manifests both of them. Glutted as he is with hubris, he carries out many reckless deeds and will then commit more outrageous acts out of envy! Since he possesses all good things, the tyrant ought to be entirely free from envy, but instead, he behaves just the opposite towards the citizens, for he envies the best men if they survive and live around him, while he derives pleasure from the worst people in town. But he himself is the best of men when it comes to accepting slander. [5] And indeed, his character is most inconsistent in nature, for if you admire him to a moderate degree, he is vexed that he is not being treated with sufficient deference, but if you treat him subserviently, then he becomes annoyed by your obsequiousness. And the worst of all his traits is

that he overturns the laws of our fathers; he uses brute force on women, and he kills men without trial. [6] The rule of the many [πλῆθος δὲ ἄρχον], however, not only has the most beautiful and powerful name of all, isonomy [ἰσονομίην = equality by law], but in practice it does not at all act like a monarch. Indeed, it chooses its magistrates by lot; it holds all of these officials accountable to an audit; and it refers all resolutions to the public [τὸ κοινὸν]. I therefore propose that we abandon monarchy, and exalt the many. For in the many is the whole.”

3.81 Next, Megabyzos urged them to turn to oligarchy, saying, “I am in favor of what Otanes says in his attempt to put an end to tyranny, but when he tells us to transfer power to the many, he has strayed far from good judgment. For nothing can be both more unintelligent or full of hubris than the worthless, ineffectual mob. [2] If men want to escape the hubris of a tyrant, it is absolutely intolerable that they should then fall victim to the hubris of the undisciplined common people [δήμου]. For whatever the tyrant may do, he at least knows what he is doing, whereas the people have no idea what they are doing. How could someone who has not been educated, who has never seen anything good or decent, be knowledgeable about anything? He pushes and shoves and stumbles into affairs without thought, like a raging torrent. [3] So let those who are hostile to the Persians be governed by the people [δῆμῳ], while we pick out the best men to make up an intimate company and endow it with power and authority. We ourselves will of course belong to this company, and the best men are most likely to make the best decisions.” that, then, was the opinion of Megabyzos.

3.82 The third to express his opinion was Darius, who said, “What Megabyzos claimed about the many seems right to me, but what he said about oligarchy seems wrong. For if we compare by argument [τῷ λόγῳ] the best of these three types of government—the best rule of the people, rule of the few, and rule of one—I declare that monarchy surpasses the other two by far. [2] For obviously nothing

can be better than the one man who is the best. And since he has the best judgment, he would blamelessly guard over the many, and thus, too, he would best be able to maintain silence about his plans to oppose enemies. [3] In an oligarchy, on the other hand, many men strive to achieve excellence [ἀρετὴν], and so private rivalries tend to become public hostilities. For each man wants to be the head of affairs and desires that his own opinions prevail; so that they ultimately become extremely hostile toward one another, which leads to the emergence of factions [στάσεις], which in turn produces bloodshed, and which then results in the establishment of a monarchy. This progression, then, also demonstrates just how much monarchy excels the others. [4] Then again, when the people rule [δήμου τε αὐτῷ ἄρχοντος], the worst [κακότητα] will always and inevitably be the result. While the worst is present, these bad men do not themselves engage in public hostilities, but instead form strong friendships among one another as they incompetently manage the commonwealth together. This situation goes on until one of them steps forth as leader of the people and stops the others from continuing such actions, after which this man is much admired by the people. And because of this admiration, he is effectively declared to be the monarch, which again proves that monarchy is the best of the three. [5] But I can summarize my argument by one statement: Where did our freedom [ἐλευθερίῃ] come from, who gave it to us? Did it come from the people, from an oligarchy, or from a monarchy? Well, then, in my opinion, since we were freed by one man, we should preserve that form of government. Moreover, we should not undo the laws of our fathers, which are fine just as they are, for that would not be the better course.”

3.83 These were the three opinions presented at the meeting, and after the other four of the seven men decided in favor of the last one, Otanes, despite his eagerness to establish isonomy, recognized that he had lost the argument, and now he addressed them all: [2] “My comrades, it is clear that one of us must become King, and whether he who will be entrusted with the rule of the kingdom is chosen

by lot, by the majority of the Persians, or by some other method, I shall not compete with you, for I am willing neither to rule nor to be ruled [οὔτε γὰρ ἄρχειν οὔτε ἄρχεσθαι ἐθέλω]. So I now withdraw from this contest on the following condition: that neither I nor my descendants will be ruled [ἄρξομαι] by you.” [3] When he stated this requirement, the other six agreed to it, and so he took no part in the competition among them, but stood aside with an attitude of neutrality. And even now, Otanes’ family is the only free one [ἐλευθέρη] among the Persians; it is ruled only as much as it wants to be, although it does not transgress Persian laws.

3.84 The remaining six then deliberated about how they could most fairly establish one of themselves in the position of King. First they all agreed that if the kingship did go to one of them, Otanes and his descendants would be granted yearly allotments of Median clothing and every other gift thought to be most honorable in Persia. They decided to grant him these gifts because he had been the first to plan the conspiracy and bring them all together. [2] And in addition to these perquisites for Otanes, they resolved to establish other privileges that they would share in common: they agreed that any one of the seven would be allowed to go into the palace without an official to announce him, unless the King happened to be sleeping with a woman at the time, and that the King would not be permitted to marry a woman from any families other than their own. [3] Concerning the selection of the King, they decided that at sunrise, they would all mount their horses and ride just outside the city, and the man whose horse made the first sound would have the kingship.

3.85 Now Darius’ groom was a wise man [ἄνθρωπος σοφός], whose name was Oibares, and when the meeting had dispersed, Darius went to him and said, “Oibares, this is what we have decided to do about the kingship: we are all going to mount our horses just as the sun rises, and the man whose horse makes the first sound will obtain the royal power. So now, if you have any wisdom [σοφίην] at all, devise a

plan to assure that we and no one else obtain this prize.” [2] Oibares replied, “My lord, if that is what will determine whether or not you become King, have no fear. You may be confident that no one but you will be King, since I know just the remedy required for this situation.” “Well then,” said Darius, “if you know of such a trick, do not save it for another day. Now is the time to use it, for our contest [ἀγὼν] will take place with the next dawn.” [3] After Oibares had heard this, he waited till nightfall, and took the mare Darius loved most to the area just outside the city and tied her there securely. Then he led Darius’ stallion there and walked him around the mare repeatedly, brushing him up against her as he did so, until he finally allowed the stallion to mount her.

3.86 As dawn began to break, the six men, as they had agreed, mounted their horses and rode out to the area just outside the city. Just as they approached the place where the mare had been tied up the night before, Darius’ stallion ran up to the spot and whinnied. [2] At the very same time, lightning appeared and thunder sounded out of the clear sky like a signal of agreement which added a perfect conclusion to the decision for Darius. The other men immediately dismounted from their horses and prostrated themselves before Darius....And so Darius son of Hystaspes was appointed King [βασιλεὺς].

Herodotus, *The Landmark Herodotus: The Histories*, ed. Robert B. Strassler, trans. Andrea Purvis (New York: Anchor Books, 2009), 245-249 [translation modified].