

## MONSTROUS OMENS IN HERODOTUS' *HISTORIES*

In Herodotus' *Histories* monstrous creatures are generally confined to the edges of the world.<sup>1</sup> Creatures such as the flying snakes of Arabia and the giant ants of India provide an exotic and marvellous quality to the lands that make up the periphery of the world. Monsters which appear in omens are the only ones which appear in spatial or chronological proximity to the contemporary Greek world. Their status as divine signs or messages normalises such distortions of nature occurring so close to the audience. However, even these divinely sanctioned deviations from nature are somewhat distanced from the audience. Of the four that appear in the *Histories*, the two that occur on Greek soil do so at its very edges, and one occurs in the distant past. So, while they are less distant than monsters that Herodotus describes with no divine significance, they still do not inhabit the same conceptual space as the audience.

The first of the monstrous omens is the birth of a lion to the concubine of Meles, king of Sardis. During the description of Cyrus' siege of Sardis, Herodotus breaks the narrative to tell the story of the birth of the lion cub, which occurred many years before the siege. When the lion was born Meles carried the cub round the walls of the city except for one part:

τῆ οὐδὲ Μήλης ὁ πρότερον βασιλεὺς Σαρδίων μούνη οὐ περιήνεικε τὸν λέοντα τὸν οἱ ἡ παλλακὴ ἔτεκε, Τελμησσέων δικασάντων ὡς περιενειχθέντος τοῦ λέοντος τὸ τεῖχος ἔσονται Σάρδιες ἀνάλωτοι. ὁ δὲ Μήλης κατὰ τὸ ἄλλο τεῖχος περιενείκας, τῆ ἦν ἐπίμαχον [τὸ χωρίον] τῆς ἀκροπόλιος, κατηλόγησε τοῦτο ὡς ἐὼν ἄμαχόν τε καὶ ἀπότομον.

'It was only round this place that Meles, a past king of Sardis, did not carry the lion which his concubine had borne him. The Telmessians had judged that the walls of Sardis would be impregnable if the lion were carried around them. Meles carried it round the rest of the walls, the parts of the

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acropolis that could easily be attacked, but neglected this spot on the grounds that it was unassailable and precipitous.<sup>2</sup>

(1.84.3)

However, it was exactly this part of the walls that Cyrus' men were able scale, and so enter the city and take it (1.84.4-5). The story of the lion cub is therefore told to explain the current situation in the main narrative of the text.

This lion cub has been traditionally interpreted as a symbol of Near Eastern royal power.<sup>3</sup> On this basis Meles' failure to carry the lion round the entire circuit of the walls represents a failure in the royal protection of Sardis; the ineffective safeguarding of the city becomes evident later when Cyrus is able to take the city. This interpretation of the lion as a straightforward symbol of power is in part due to a similar story which appears later at 6.121. Here Herodotus reports that Agariste, the mother of Pericles, dreamt that she gave birth to a lion a few days before Pericles was born. How and Wells interpret this vision as an 'exultation' of Pericles by Herodotus and part of a 'defence and glory of the Alcmaeonids' (1912, vol. 2: 119-20). The reading of this dream as explicitly positive influences the interpretation of the omen of Meles' lion: if the lion in Agariste's dream symbolises power and glory, then presumably so does the lion in Sardis.

However, this is not evident from other examples within the text. The representation of a woman giving birth to a lion appears elsewhere in the *Histories*. At 5.92 Herodotus gives the story of the Corinthian woman Labda and her son. Labda's family, the rulers of Corinth, received an oracle which stated that she would give birth to a lion, which symbolised danger to Corinth. They therefore married her to a man from Petra to remove her from the city. However, when her son, Cypselus, was an adult he overthrew his mother's family and became the tyrant of Corinth. The

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<sup>2</sup> Translations of Herodotus' *Histories* are my own.

<sup>3</sup> How and Wells (1912 vol. 2: 119-20); Jastrow (1914: 53-4). Asheri et al. focus on the lion's role as a heraldic animal.

depiction of Cypselus as a lion in this passage is explicitly connected with his displacement of the rulers of Corinth.

The danger of the lions born to human parents, in reality or dreams, is reflected by the danger Herodotus believed lion cubs presented to parents of their own species. When explaining why dangerous creatures exist in small numbers and benign ones in larger numbers, Herodotus states that lionesses are only able to produce as single cub during their lifetime due as the cub damages the womb so much during the pregnancy that the womb must be expelled by the mother at the time of birth (3.108). Thus lion cubs are presented as dangerous to their parents, no matter their species.

Examples of women giving birth to lions, or dreaming of doing so, also appear outside the *Histories*. For example, a Babylonian birth-omen explains the meaning of a women giving birth to a lion cub: 'If a woman gives birth to a lion, that city will be taken, the king will be captured' (Cun. Texts XXVI Pl. 4).<sup>4</sup> An almost identical portent is described in Cicero's *On Divination*, but in this case in the form of a dream: 'if a woman dreamt that she gave birth to a lion, the country in which this had happened would be overcome by foreign nations' (1.121).<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the wording is so similar in the Babylonian birth omens and *On Divination* that Jastrow believes Cicero's version to be derived from the Babylonian prophecy (1914: 53).<sup>6</sup> However, without evidence of Cicero's source, it is not possible to prove such a direct link. The two texts are not identical: the Babylonian omen describes the possible birth of a real lion-like, but apparently still human, child, whereas the Roman text refers to a lion born to human parents in the context of a dream. Nevertheless, the similarity of the phrasing and the meaning of the birth of the lion in each text make it plausible that such a connection

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<sup>4</sup> Trans. Jastrow, 1914: 40.

<sup>5</sup> Trans. Wardle, 2006: 84.

<sup>6</sup> Jastrow argues that knowledge of Babylonian divination reached the Romans due to transmission through peoples including the Hittites, Etruscans and Greeks (1914: 4).

exists. Whether or not Cicero's version is derived from the Babylonian prophecy, the similarity in the texts shows the link between the birth of a lion to human parents and the fall of a city was part of a long-standing tradition.

The image of a lion cub being raised in a human household is also used by Aeschylus in the *Agamemnon*. At 717-36 the chorus explain how a lion cub brought into the home is initially a delight, but as it grows it becomes dangerous and destroys the household that reared it. Here the description is used to explain the damage wrought by Helen's presence in Troy; like the lion cub she was initially appealing but eventually brought ruin on the city.<sup>7</sup>

In light of these examples we can see that the lion cannot function solely as a symbol of Near Eastern royal power. Since, as Munson notes, although lions in the *Histories* are often symbolic of power, they almost always have dangerous connotations (2001: 245-6). On this basis McNellan argues that Agariste's dream should be reinterpreted in light of these examples, particularly the story of Cypselus and the omen of Meles' lion cub (1997, 22-23). It is certainly hard to see it as straightforward praise of Pericles or his family when connections have been drawn between lion cubs and the destruction of cities or the overthrow of rulers. Taking these examples together, therefore, it is possible to see that the Meles' lion cub is not just a symbol of Near Eastern Royal power, but rather one of potential destruction and danger for the city in which it was born.

It would be simplistic to argue that in all of these examples the lion born to human parents as an omen, dream or oracle has precisely the same meaning. Even within Herodotus, the exact significance of the lion differs somewhat. This can be seen in the fact that the Greek women only dream of giving birth to lions, but the foreign woman actually does so. Other themes within the text, in this case ideas about the

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<sup>7</sup> Aeschylus' use of the lion cub is parodied in Aristophanes' *Frogs* (1431-33).

difference between Greek and foreign peoples, necessarily influence the descriptions of these events. Nevertheless, there does appear to be a consistent connection between the idea of a lion born to human parents and that of destruction of a monarch or a city. Therefore when examining the omen of the birth of a lion cub to Meles' concubine, it seems to be unfeasible that the fall of Sardis during Cyrus' siege is linked only to Meles' incomplete use of the lion cub to secure the walls. The lion cannot, as Asheri argues, be seen as a guarantee of impregnability (Asheri et al., 2007: 140). Instead, the very fact that a human mother bore such child in Sardis is in itself indicative of the future destruction of the city.

The second and third monstrous omens, which occur in 7.57-58.1, also take the form of monstrous births:

ὥς δὲ διέβησαν πάντες, ἐς ὁδὸν ὀρμημένοισι τέρας σφί ἐφάνη μέγα, τὸ Ξέρξης ἐν οὐδενὶ λόγῳ ἐποίησατο καίπερ εὐσύμβλητον ἔόν· ἵππος γὰρ ἔτεκε λαγόν. εὐσύμβλητον ὦν τῆδε τοῦτο ἐγένετο, ὅτι ἔμελλε μὲν ἔλάν στρατιήν ἐπὶ τὴν Ἑλλάδα Ξέρξης ἀγαυρότατα καὶ μεγαλοπρεπέστατα, ὀπίσω δὲ περὶ ἑωυτοῦ τρέχων ἦξειν ἐς τὸν αὐτὸν χῶρον. ἐγένετο δὲ καὶ ἕτερον αὐτῷ τέρας ἐόντι ἐν Σάρδισι· ἡμίονος γὰρ ἔτεκε ἡμίονον διζὰ ἔχουσαν αἰδοῖα, τὰ μὲν ἔρσηνος τὰ δὲ θηλέης· κατύπερθε δὲ ἦν τὰ τοῦ ἔρσηνος. τῶν ἀμφοτέρων λόγον οὐδένα ποιησάμενος τὸ πρόσω ἐπορεύετο, σὺν δὲ οἱ ὁ πεζὸς στρατός.

'When they had all come across and were setting out on the road a great marvel appeared to them; Xerxes took no notice of it although it was easy to interpret. A horse gave birth to a hare. It was easy to interpret in this way: Xerxes was destined to proudly and magnificently march his army to Greece, but that on his return to the same place he would be running for his life. Another marvel appeared to him when he was in Sardis: a mule gave birth to another mule with two sets of genitals, both male and female; the male above the female. He took no notice of either and marched on; the land army was with him.'

In contrast to the obscure symbolism of the birth of the lion, the birth of the hare to the mare is explained for the audience by Herodotus. It is made clear that the horse represents the pride and splendour of Xerxes' journey to Greece, and the hare his desperate escape. The omen, then, demonstrates to the audience the inevitability of the failure of Xerxes' expedition from the moment he arrives in Greece.

The birth of the hare triggers a break in narrative and the description of another, earlier omen: while Xerxes was in Sardis, a mule gave birth to a foal with both male and female genitals. Despite seeming like the most simple of the three monstrous births, as it is an animal giving birth to one of its own species, it is possibly the most complex. Since the mule has the genitalia of both sexes, it transgresses the boundaries of male and female. Also, as the animal is a mule, and so a crossbreed of a horse and donkey, it embodies a blurring of species. Additionally, a mule is usually a sterile animal;<sup>8</sup> not only does the mother in this case give birth, but she does so to a child with both male and female genitalia. In being thus endowed, it is, in appearance at least, excessively fertile for a normal creature, let alone a sterile one.

This birth of the hermaphrodite mule is not explained in any way by Herodotus. Therefore one might seek to find comparative examples to illuminate the symbolism, as with the lion cub above. The only other instance of the blurring of male and female in the *Histories* is the story of the *enareis* at 1.105. These Scythians were punished for pillaging Aphrodite's temple in Cyprus with 'a female sickness' (θήλεαν νοῦσον); no more explicit explanation is given of what this sickness entailed. The lack of detail in this case makes it impossible to compare the *enareis* to the omen of the hermaphroditic mule. The unique nature of this omen might simply be taken to reinforce the sense of immanent disaster at this point of the narrative.

However, there are two other examples of mules as divine messages in the *Histories*. The first is in the oracle that Croesus receives from Delphi and famously misunderstands at 1.55-56. The oracle tells Croesus that he should flee when a mule becomes king of the Medes; he fails to interpret the symbolism of the message, and takes it to literally mean the animal. As is explained later at 1.91, Cyrus was the mule

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<sup>8</sup> From the comment of the unnamed Babylonian to Darius at 3.151 (discussed below), and the lack of a correction by Herodotus it is more than likely that Herodotus was unaware that mules can occasionally give birth, and so this event is presented as an impossible occurrence.

as his mother was the daughter of the king of Medes and his father was a Persian. Croesus' failure to understand the nature of the message gives him a false sense of security, as he takes it to represent an impossible situation. His complacency, in turn, contributes to his downfall. The second example occurs during Darius' siege of Babylon (3.151-159). Herodotus tells us that when Darius came to Babylon to put down a rebellion, one of the Babylonians told him he would take Babylon when mules give birth (i.e. 'when hell freezes over'). Twenty months into the siege exactly this happens, a mule gives birth. Its owner Zopyros interprets it as a divine sign that Darius will take the city and so concocts a plot to allow Darius to do so.

Zopyros is the only person in these examples to take notice of the mule when it is presented as a divine message, and so is the only one to benefit from it. Croesus misunderstands the significance of the mule in the oracle he receives; Xerxes ignores it completely. Mikalson notes that in Herodotus all omens which are ignored or dismissed by those that receive them lead to disaster (2003: 43). So it is not the symbolism of the mule that is important in this case; the mixture and complexity of its nature simply point to a divine symbol that should be acknowledged. Rather, it is the fact that Xerxes chose to ignore it. His refusal to acknowledge such a deviation from nature as a divine sign foreshadows the failure of his expedition.

The final omen appears very near the end of the text:

καί τεω τῶν φυλασσόντων λέγεται ὑπὸ Χερσονησιτέων ταρίχους ὀπτῶντι  
τέρας γενέσθαι τοιόνδε· οἱ τάριχοι ἐπὶ τῷ πυρὶ κείμενοι ἐπάλλοντό τε καὶ  
ἤσπαιρον ὅκως περ ἰχθύες νεοάλωτοι.

'It is said by the people of the Chersonese that a marvel occurred to one of the guards while he was cooking preserved fish. The fish lying on the fire began to jump and gasp just like freshly caught fish.'

(9.120.1)

These fish were being cooked by the Greek guards of a group of captured Persians after Xerxes' expedition had failed. One of the prisoners, Artayctes,

interpreted the fish coming back to life as a warning from Protesilaeus. He said that it was an indication that Protesilaeus was able to punish him from beyond the grave for stealing from his sanctuary.<sup>9</sup> As retribution, Xanthippus ordered the Athenians to nail Artayctes to a plank of wood and make him watch his son being stoned to death.

As in the case of the hare born to the horse, we are given the explanation of the meaning of the omen by Herodotus. The fish being brought back to life by Protesilaeus indicated his ability to continue to wield influence in the mortal world.<sup>10</sup> In fact, Artayctes' own interpretation of the omen makes it come true: having told the Greeks the meaning of the reanimated fish, they enact the punishment. The clarity of omen in this instance, as in the omen of the hare, is necessary due to the role his omen plays in the narrative of the text. The desecration of the sanctuary of the Trojan hero Protesilaeus by Artayctes links the end of the text with the Trojan Wars, and thus the series of abductions of women which opened the *Histories* (Boedeker, 1988: 43; Dewald, 1997: 67). Artayctes also provides a model for Xerxes: he is also a man who entered a forbidden territory and was punished for doing so (Boedeker, 1988: 45). The transparency of this omen therefore allows Herodotus to close the *Histories* with a story that binds together the mythical origins of conflict between the Greeks and the Persians and an allusion to its final stages.

As is the case with non-monstrous omens in the *Histories*, the monstrous omens provide potential motives or explanations for the events of the main narrative. However, by examining the monstrous omens together it can be shown that they create an additional undercurrent in the text. All four of these omens are associated with two places: Sardis and the point where Xerxes first landed in Greece. Meles' lion and the hermaphrodite mule are born at Sardis, while Artayctes is punished and the

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<sup>9</sup> From 7.33 and 9.116 we know that Artayctes had not just stolen from the sanctuary, but had also committed sacrilege by having sex with women within the sanctuary.

<sup>10</sup> Boedeker (1988: 41) notes the verbal link between the salted fish, τάριχοι (9.120.1), and Protesilaeus who is himself dead and preserved, τάριχος (9.120.2).



hare is born where the Persians cross the Hellespont. These two geographic points are extremely important to the narrative of Xerxes' attack on Greece. The site of Xerxes' first arrival in Greece is clearly a significant location in his expedition, as it marks the first stage of the attempted invasion. As we learn from 7.37, Sardis is also an important site in the narrative of Xerxes' journey. It is the place at which Xerxes waited with his army until the bridge across the Hellespont was complete. The monstrous omens are therefore connected to two vital points in the Persian expedition.

Herodotus connects these two locations at 7.57-58.1: the birth of the hare to the horse triggers the description of the earlier omen of the hermaphroditic mule. By thus linking these two places, which are associated with monstrous omens, in this way Herodotus creates a strong sense of danger and foreboding around Xerxes' attempt to invade Greece. These monstrous omens span the whole text: Meles' lion appears in the initial half of the first book, and the story of the reanimated fish appears only two chapters before the end of the *Histories*. Such monstrous omens therefore provide a sense of danger and foreboding in association with Xerxes' expedition against Greece that ripples throughout the *Histories*.

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