

Descent and Marriage in Achaemenid Iran

With the Medes and Persians we leave the realm of what are often considered the aboriginal peoples of the Iranian plateau and lowland Khuzestan and enter the Indo-European or Indo-Iranian realm. The evidence from the earlier and mid-first millennium BC raises a number of important questions, only a few of which will be considered here.

MEDES, ACHAEMENIDS, AND THE TRIBAL QUESTION

The ancient historian Albert Ten Eyck Olmstead considered the Medes “essentially nomadic, though they had been settled long enough in the mountains to have taken on some of the characteristics of a sedentary people.”¹ Nevertheless, the Neo-Assyrian sources make it clear that the Median landscape was dominated by towns, villages, and fortresses overseen by *bēl āli* (city lords).² Discussing “the Median people”—for which he uses the Greek noun *ethnos* (ἔθνος)—Herodotus (*Hist.* 1.101) lists the names of six Median *genea* (γένεα), tribes or descent groups: the Busae, Paretaceni, Struchates, Arizanti, Budii, and Magi. In analyzing Herodotus’s use of the terms *ethnos* and *genos*, Christopher P. Jones noted that “while he might mean the second to be a subdivision of the first”—that is, the *genea* (tribes or descent groups) to be subsets of the Median *ethnos* (people or nation)—“he could equally well be referring to these six groups as hereditary” or, as he put it, “united by birth,” or “a genetic group and not an ancestral one.”³ As Karen Radner stressed, however, much of modern scholarship “prefers to see Herodotus’s *Medikos Logos* as largely fictitious and cautions against its use as a historical source.”⁴

1. Olmstead 1951, 244.

2. Radner 2003. Cf. Potts 2014, 69.

3. Jones 1996, 317, 318.

4. Radner 2013, 454. Cf. Helm 1981.

Herodotus, of course, also famously wrote, “There are many tribes in Persia,” and he went on to name the Pasargadae, the Maraphians, and the Maspian, upon whom all the other Persians “hang” (*Hist.* 1.125). The Achaemenids, by which he presumably meant the descent group of the eponymous Achaemenes, were part of the Pasargadae, a “Königshaus” in the words of Hans Heinrich Schaeder.⁵ In describing the Achaemenids, Herodotus used the term *phratry* (*phrêtrê*; φρατρία), and it is striking that no other social or demographic category discussed in his work was identified in this way. Some years ago, the ancient Greek historian Pietro Vannicelli noted, “*Phrêtrê* is generally translated ‘clan,’ but this translation does not really help in understanding the definition given by Herodotus.” Vannicelli went on to note that the *genos*—possibly a descent group, as mentioned above—was a subset of the phratry in normal Greek usage.⁶ Lewis Henry Morgan considered the phratry to be “a brotherhood, as the term imports, and a natural growth from the organization into gentes. It is an organic union or association of two or more gentes of the same tribe for common objects.”⁷ This is actually the opposite of what Herodotus implied when he called the Achaemenid phratry part of the Pasargadae *genos*.⁸ Moreover, *genos* was the term used for tribe when Herodotus and Ctesias discussed the Mardoi.⁹

But as Sarre and Herzfeld noted in 1910, the question of clans and tribes in ancient Iran is complicated.¹⁰ They cited the great German Iranologist Friedrich Carl Andreas, who suggested that the record of Darius I’s descent given at Nāqš-e Rostām (DNa)—son of Vištāspa, of the Achaemenid clan, a Persian, son of a Persian, an Aryan, of Aryan lineage¹¹—was a direct reflection of Avestan social terminology, from family/house (*nmana*), village/clan (*vis-*), and tribe (*zantu-*) to land (*dahyu*).¹² Émile Benveniste and Arthur Christensen both believed this quadripartite division of Iranian patriarchal society was essentially territorial,¹³

5. Schaeder 1936, 748.

6. Vannicelli 2012, 266n29.

7. Morgan 1877, 88.

8. This point was emphasized by Waters (2004, 96). This recalls Herodotus’s use of the terms *ethnos* and *genos*, for, as Jones (1996, 315) noted, “an *ethnos* is sometimes a subdivision of the *genos*, and sometimes the contrary.” In British anthropological discourse, as Fortes (1953, 25) observed many years ago in discussing unilineal descent groups, “British anthropologists now regularly use the term *lineage* for these descent groups . . . to distinguish them from wider often dispersed divisions of society ordered to the notion of common—but not demonstrable and often mythological—ancestry for which we find it useful to reserve the label *clan*.”

9. Andreas 1904, 95. Cf. Herodotus, *Hist.* 1.125; and for Ctesias, see Lenfant 2004, 93–95, 103. On the Mardians, see the long discussion in Potts 2014, 94–99.

10. Sarre and Herzfeld 1910, 16.

11. See Kent 1950, 138: “son of Hystaspes, an Achaemenian, a Persian, son of a Persian, an Aryan, having Aryan lineage.” Cf. Lecoq 1997, 219; Schmitt 2009, 100.

12. Sarre and Herzfeld 1910, 16; Meillet 1925, 23.

13. Benveniste 1932, 125; Christensen 1936, 13.



FIGURE 8. Darius I's relief at Bisotun (photo: courtesy of W.F.M. Henkelman).

whereas, for Antoine Meillet, it was political.¹⁴ Andreas, in contrast, believed it was both: *vis* could refer to a territorial entity, in this case the clan's village or habitat, or it "may signify the people themselves."¹⁵

DARIUS I'S GENEALOGICAL CHARTER

The term Haxāmanišiyā, or Achaemenids, used by Darius, has been called a "Sippenbezeichnung,"¹⁶ or "pro-patronymic."¹⁷ It was used both by Herodotus (*Hist.* 1.125) and Darius I in his Bisotun inscription (DB I §§1–2; see fig. 8). There, the newly minted Persian king traced his descent via Hystaspes, Arsames, Ariaramnes, and Teispes—establishing a link to Cyrus via Teispes—back to the eponymous Achaemenes.

Much has been written over the years on the veracity, or otherwise, of the lineage given by Darius. Pierre Briant, for example, wrote of Darius's insistence, "not without falsification," of his filiation or, more correctly, his descent.¹⁸ One relevant

14. Meillet 1925, 23.

15. Herzfeld 1937, 937.

16. Shayegan 2010, 176n16.

17. Schmitt 2002, 364.

18. Briant 1996, 1:535. Cf. Kent 1946, 212, who speculated "that Ctesias gave . . . [a] falsified account of Cyrus's origin at the request of Artaxerxes II, who was seeking in every way to discredit the line and even the very name of Cyrus." Vallat (1997, 429–30) gave a rather tortured explanation,

point has been largely overlooked in the debate over Darius's claims, however. As Bronislaw Malinowski pointed out, a genealogy should be viewed as "a legal charter rather than an historical record."¹⁹ Echoing this point, A. R. Radcliffe-Brown noted, in 1935, that genealogy is "fundamentally a jural concept."²⁰ Similarly, as Meyer Fortes stressed, "If there is one thing all recent investigations are agreed upon it is that lineage genealogies are not historically accurate. But they can be understood if they are seen to be the conceptualization of the existing lineage structure viewed as continuing through time and therefore projected backward as pseudo-history."²¹ In fact, Paul and Laura Bohannan found the Tiv of northern Nigeria "rearranging their lineage genealogies to bring them into line with changes in the existing pattern of legal and political relations within and between lineages."²² This certainly reminds one of Darius I and, when read with DB I §§1–2 in mind, the observations of Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown, Fortes, and the Bohannans strongly suggest that a literal reading of the genealogy of Darius I misses the point, nor does its biological accuracy, or otherwise, bear any relation to its real intent. Darius I's genealogical charter is, as foreshadowed in chapter 1, a record of "arrangement and alignment, in the first place a principle of political design."²³

DARIUS I'S CHOICE OF XERXES AS HIS SUCCESSOR

As Evelyn Cecil noted in discussing primogeniture in feudal Europe, "For a time, before primogeniture was fully established, a lord had been able to bestow his feud on whichever of his sons he thought proper." Cecil was decidedly of the opinion, however, "that primogeniture in the West has been of the highest political value in averting internal discord and civil war. . . . There is no recorded parallel to the infamies attending some of the Ottoman successions. The Shahs of Persia and earlier Indian princes were scarcely more discriminating than their imperial brothers of Turkey. Unscrupulous family murder commonly inaugurated their reigns."²⁴

The issue of primogeniture in royal succession, as opposed to property or titular inheritance, arises in the case of Darius I's choice of his son Xerxes as his designated successor. In 2015 Richard Stoneman discussed this topic at length.²⁵ His two

seeking to harmonize all of the names given in the genealogies of both Darius and Xerxes, but it requires so many unverifiable assumptions that it is hardly credible.

19. Fortes 1953, 27–28, paraphrasing Malinowski 1926, 56.

20. Quoted in Fortes 1953, 28.

21. Fortes 1953, 27.

22. Quoted in Fortes 1953, 27–28.

23. Sahlins 1965, 106.

24. Cecil 1895, 87, 79.

25. Stoneman 2015, 23–26.

main sources, Herodotus (7.2–3) and Justin (2.10.1–10), are largely in agreement. According to Herodotus:

Before Darius became king, he already had three sons from his earlier wife, the daughter of Gobryas; after he became king, he had four more by Atossa, the daughter of Cyrus. The eldest of the first three was Ariobazanes, and Xerxes of the second family. As they were not from the same mother they were at odds with each other: Ariobazanes claiming that he was the eldest of all the children and that it was customary among all mankind for the eldest to have precedence, while Xerxes claimed that he was the son of the daughter of Cyrus, and it was Cyrus who had established freedom for the Persians.

Justin differs in naming Ariaramnes as the eldest of Darius's first group of children, rather than Ariobazanes, noting that Ariaramnes

claimed the throne by reason of his age: order of birth and nature itself had established this law among all people. But Xerxes wanted to move the debate, not to the issue of rank, but to the timing of their birth. In his view, Ariaramnes was certainly Darius' first-born, but while Darius was still a *subject*, whereas *he* was the first-born of Darius as king. For that reason, his older brother was entitled to claim the private property which their father had owned, but not the throne; but it was he who was the first child born to his father *after* his accession to the throne. . . . Even were it to be supposed that the two brothers had equal rights because of their father, he would still win out because of his mother and paternal grandfather.²⁶

Thus, the justification for Xerxes's succession implied by Justin was his pedigree rather than, as has sometimes been argued, the influence of his mother Atossa.²⁷ The sources agree in recognizing Darius's second wife, Atossa, as a daughter of Cyrus the Great, whereas Darius I's "earlier wife," as Herodotus put it, was a daughter of Gobryas.²⁸ I suggest that filiation and descent were the decisive factors in the promotion of Xerxes over Ariobazanes, not the fact that Darius I was king when Xerxes was born but not when Ariobazanes was born. A parallel situation occurred more than two thousand years later in Fath 'Ali Shah's choice of 'Abbas Mirza—his second,²⁹ third³⁰ or fourth³¹ son, depending on which source one believes³²—as crown-prince, over his eldest son Mohammad 'Ali Mirza. This has always been explained by the fact that the mother of Mohammad 'Ali Mirza was a Georgian slave, whereas that of 'Abbas Mirza was Asiya Khanom, daughter

26. Quotes taken from Kuhrt 2007, 245–46.

27. On the basis of the Persepolis Fortification texts, Henkelman (2010b) disputed the power and influence of Atossa.

28. She was possibly Apame. See Kuhrt 2007, 173n1 and 245n4.

29. Johnson 1818, 169; von Hammer 1819, 281; Anonymous 1834, 322.

30. Tancoigne 1820, 72.

31. Eichwald 1837, 551; Hasan-e Fasa'i (Busse 1972, 36).

32. An anonymous author (1873, 715, 717) lists him as the firstborn son of Fath 'Ali Shah, but this is contradicted by all other sources.

of Fath ‘Ali Khan Devellu, a high-born Qajar whom Fath ‘Ali Shah had married at the behest of his uncle and predecessor on the throne, Aqa Mohammad Shah.³³ As James Silk Buckingham wrote in 1830, Fath ‘Ali Shah’s eldest two sons, Mohamad Vali Mirza and Mohammad ‘Ali Mirza, “are the offspring of the king by Georgian women; the third is by a high-born female of the Kujur tribe, and is therefore chosen to succeed the King.”³⁴

SISIGAMBIS, MOTHER OF DARIUS III

A curious case of kin relations in the late Achaemenid period is afforded by an episode recounted by both Diodorus and Quintus Curtius. *En route* from Susa to Persepolis Alexander’s progress was impeded in the mountain territory of the Uxians, whose governor (*praefectus regionis*) Madates/Medates initially put up stiff resistance to the Macedonian advance. Eventually, Alexander was forced to seek refuge in a mountain citadel, from which he only emerged thanks to the intervention of Sisigambis, the mother of Darius III.³⁵

Alexander’s relationship with Sisigambis is described at length by Quintus Curtius. Under severe pressure, the Uxians appealed to her to use her good offices with Alexander to pardon “both those who had been taken prisoner and those who had surrendered” (*Hist. Alex.* 5.3.15). This personal intervention has led Ali Bahadori, in a recent article on the Achaemenid Empire and what he calls the tribal confederations of southwestern Persia, to assume that both Sisigambis and Madates were Uxians, which made her “an ideal person to negotiate with Alexander.”³⁶ This inference, however, is flatly contradicted by the ancient sources, which show that Sisigambis was a granddaughter of Darius II and probably a daughter of Ostanēs/Uštana, brother of Artaxerxes II, and hence his niece.³⁷ She was thus a first cousin of Artaxerxes III.³⁸

Diodorus (17.5.5) says that Darius III “was the son of Arsanes”; hence, Arsanes was Sisigambis’s husband, and “grandson of that Ostanēs who was a brother of Artaxerxes, who had been king”—that is, Artaxerxes II. The credit for unraveling the complex filiation and descent of Sisigambis goes to the ancient historian Otto Neuhaus, whose 1902 article on this subject has yet to be superseded.³⁹ One

33. Busse 2011.

34. Buckingham 1830, 415–16n*. Cf. Eichwald 1837, 550n*.

35. On the question of her name, see Badian (2000, 244), who wrote, “We do not know his mother’s name. She is consistently called Sisigambis in Diodorus and usually Sisigambis (with manuscript variants) in Curtius. Neither of these authors is known for accuracy over (especially Persian) names and neither form has found a convincing etymology.” For further discussion see also Badian 2015; Yardley and Heckel 1997, 136–37. Justi (1895, 304), s.v. Σισύγγαμβρις, offered no etymology.

36. Bahadori 2017, 173.

37. Neuhaus 1902: 621, 617.

38. For a chart showing Achaemenid filiation, see Briant (1996, 2:793).

39. Neuhaus 1902.

explanation of Sisigambis's efforts on behalf of Madates is given by Quintus Curtius, according to whom Madates was married to Sisigambis's niece, specifically the daughter of her sister "and thus was a near relative of Darius" (*Hist. Alex.* 5.3.12). Diodorus, however, calls Madates a *suggenes* (συγγενής), or kinsman, of Darius III (17.66.4).⁴⁰ As anyone can appreciate who has ever delved into the terminology for cousin, nephew, and related kin terms in Greek and Latin or Indo-European languages more broadly,⁴¹ Bradford Welles's identification of Madates as Darius's "cousin" in his Loeb Classical Library translation of Diodorus glossed over and unnecessarily confused their relationship.⁴² Rather, the translation "kinsman" is more appropriate given that Madates was not a blood-relation of Darius's but was married to a first cousin of Darius III's and was therefore what we would more accurately call a cousin-by-marriage.⁴³

One further point about Sisigambis deserves mention. According to Quintus Curtius (*Hist. Alex.* 10.5.23), she had eighty brothers, all of whom, along with her father, were killed by Artaxerxes III. In the account given by Valerius Maximus (*Memorable Doings and Sayings* 9.2, ext. 7), the deed was even worse, for Artaxerxes III "buried his sister (also his mother-in-law) Atossa alive head downward and killed with darts his uncle along with more than a hundred sons and grandsons, left at his mercy in an empty space; not provoked by any injury but because he saw that they had a great name among the Persians for uprightness and bravery."⁴⁴ Justin (10.3.1), however, said, "Possession of the throne was given to Ochus [Artaxerxes III], who, dreading a similar conspiracy [to that perpetrated against his father Artaxerxes II], filled the palace with the blood and dead bodies of his kinsmen and the nobility, being touched with compassion neither for consanguinity, nor sex, nor age, lest, apparently, he should be thought less wicked than his brothers that had meditated parricide."⁴⁵ Neuhaus interpreted this mass murder as the politically motivated elimination of all members of the Achaemenid house and court—regardless of age, sex, or degree of relationship—who posed a potential threat to Artaxerxes III's possession of the throne,⁴⁶ arguing persuasively that all three accounts reported on one and the same event.⁴⁷ The only divergence

40. For the different uses of this term, see the discussion in Briant (1996, 1:321–22).

41. Szemerényi 1977, 166–69.

42. See Welles 1963, 309.

43. Waterfield 2019, 461: "Madetes (or Madates) was not just a Kinsman in the honorary sense, but was married to the daughter of the sister of Darius' mother."

44. Cf. Frémion and Soulerin 1834, 255; Neuhaus 1902, 621.

45. Translation from Watson 1853.

46. Neuhaus 1902, 610: "Bekanntlich leitete der Grosskönig Artaxerxes III Ochus seine Regierung durch ein grausiges Blutbad ein, indem er alle Mitglieder des Achämenidengeschlechtes und des Hofes, von denen er in irgend einer Weise Gefahr für den Bestand seiner Herrschaft befürchten zu müssen glaubte, ohne Rücksicht auf Blutsverwandtschaft, Alter und Geschlecht abschlachten liess."

47. Hall (1989, 188) and Thomas (2018, 69–70n374) stress that although Greek readers would have been shocked by such events, they were familiar with comparable ones in the mythical history of Hellas.

in the accounts concerns the figure of eighty brothers of Sisigambis, according to Quintus Curtius, whereas Valerius Maximus wrote of more than one hundred children and grandchildren of Sisigambis's father. The numbers here are impressive, and we should note that Justin also says that Artaxerxes II had 118 sons, three by "lawful wedlock" and 115 by his concubines (Justin 10.1.1).

Although these numbers may seem wildly exaggerated to twenty-first-century readers, data from the Qajar period show that they are perfectly plausible. Fath 'Ali Shah, for example, had four legitimate wives and 154 secondary wives who bore him a total of 265 children, 159 of whom died in infancy and 106 of whom reached maturity. Six of these predeceased him, leaving him with one hundred children—fifty-five sons and forty five daughters—at the time of his death.⁴⁸ As for orchestrating the murder of eighty or one hundred potential rivals, it should be remembered that in 1725, after the flight of Tahmasp Mirza (later Tahmasp II), and the death of Shah Soltan Hoseyn, the Afghan ruler Mahmud had, by some accounts, no fewer than three hundred Safavid nobles and their children or, according to others, 105 nobles, as well as three uncles and seven nephews of Shah Soltan Hoseyn murdered in a single event,⁴⁹ thereby almost entirely extinguishing the Safavid line.

PREFERENTIAL MARRIAGE AMONG THE ACHAEMENIDS

Some years ago, the ancient historian Maria Brosius declared that "Persian kings . . . established their connections with the Persian nobility through a deliberate marriage policy," but she remained vague on how this was actually effected.⁵⁰ By contrast, in a study published more than thirty years ago on kinship in the early Achaemenid period, Clarisse Herrenschildt identified several cases of preferential marriage involving both cross-cousins and parallel-cousins.⁵¹

Chronologically, the earliest case adduced by Herrenschildt was the alleged cross-cousin, mother's brother's daughter's marriage between Cyrus the Great's son and heir, Cambyses, and his matrilineal cousin Phaidyme (*Hist.* 3.68), the daughter of Cambyses's maternal uncle Otanes—that is, his mother Cassandane's brother. The problem here is that this Otanes was almost certainly not the brother of Cyrus's wife Cassandane. Rather, Herodotus seems to have confused the identities of several homonymous Otanes. For although he says that Cyrus's wife Cassandane was the daughter of the Achaemenid Pharnaspes (*Hist.* 2.1; 3.2) and that Pharnaspes, in birth and wealth the equal of the foremost Persians, also had a son named Otanes (*Hist.* 3.68), the Bisotun inscription (DB IV §68) identifies Otanes's

48. Anonymous 1873, 714.

49. Lockhart 1958, 198; Potts 2022b, 1:34, 71 [three hundred nobles and their children], 77, 78 [105 nobles slain, three uncles of Shah Hoseyn and seven of his nephews], 294n750.

50. Brosius 2010. Cf. Bigwood 2009, 331n114.

51. Herrenschildt 1987.

father as Thukhra.⁵² Moreover, other sources, such as Ctesias (F 9 §§1–2), identify Cambyses's mother not as Cassandane but as Amytis, a daughter of the Mede Astyages,⁵³ while Deinon and Lyceas of Naucratis (Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae* 13.560e–f = Deinon F 11 = Lyceas FGH 613 F 1) identify her as an Egyptian princess named Neitetis.⁵⁴

The second cross-cousin marriage to which Herrenschmidt drew attention appears genuine. This involved Mardonius, the son of Gobryas (Herodotus, *Hist.* 3.70; DB IV §68), and Artozostre, the daughter of Darius I (*Hist.* 6.43)⁵⁵ by an unnamed wife.⁵⁶ Gobryas was a staunch ally of Darius and his brother-in-law. He was married to an unnamed sister of Darius. In Herrenschmidt's opinion, "there is every reason to think that for the Persians who reported these marriages to Herodotus, they were highly significant."⁵⁷ At one level, this is certainly true. But Herrenschmidt neglected to point out what a more recent paper by John Hyland explores—namely, the marriages of Gobryas with Darius I's sister (Herodotus, *Hist.* 7.5.1) and of Darius I himself with his brother-in-law Gobryas's daughter (Herodotus, *Hist.* 7.2.2). These marriages, Hyland argues, reflected "the probable agency of Hystaspes, Darius' father, in arranging both unions before Darius emerged as a contender for the throne," rather than an attempt by Darius himself, after becoming king, to consolidate power through marriage. Thus, Hyland sees the marriage in the context of "the aspirations of Hystaspes and Gobryas under Cambyses."⁵⁸ But although Hyland noted that the marriage of Mardonius and Artozostre "extended their familial connection in the next generation,"⁵⁹ he neglected to point out that this was a classic cross-cousin marriage. From the standpoint of Mardonius, this was a marriage with his mother's (unnamed) brother's (Darius I) daughter (Artozostre); while from Artozostre's perspective, it was a marriage with her father's (Darius I) sister's (unnamed) son (Mardonius). Moreover, in highlighting what he called the aspirations of Hystaspes and Gobryas, Hyland overlooked one of the most salient features of marriage as "a systematically organised affair which forms part of a series of contractual obligations between two groups," as opposed to a marriage representing "the whims of two persons acting as private individuals," to cite Edmund Leach. "The social groups which 'arrange' such a marriage between themselves are, in almost all societies, of essentially the same kind. The core of such a group is composed of the adult males of a kin group all resident in one place." More precisely, Leach argued that, whereas he did not wish to imply that

52. Cf. Briant 1996, 1:123 and 147. See Scott 2005, 492–93 on the seven Otanes mentioned by Herodotus and DB and the likelihood that two or more of these references apply to the same person.

53. Lenfant 2004, 109.

54. See the discussion in Henkelman 2011, 596n61.

55. In PFa 5, dated to March 498 BC, she received flour rations at several places in western Fars, viz. Liduma, Bessitme, and Kurdušum. See Kuhrt 2007, 599n4.

56. Scott 2005, 492.

57. Herrenschmidt 1987, 54.

58. Hyland 2018, 31, 32.

59. Hyland 2018, 33.

“women have no part to play in the arrangement of a marriage or that remotely situated kinsfolk are wholly ignored,” he believed that “the corporate group of persons who have the most decisive say in bringing about an arranged marriage is always a group of co-resident males representing, as a rule, three genealogical generations, namely: the old men or grandfathers, the normal adults or fathers, and the young adults or sons,” and in normal circumstances, membership in such a group “is defined by descent as well as residence.”⁶⁰

Unfortunately, the many lacunae in our genealogical information on the Persian nobility render too much speculation on the details of such a hypothetical arrangement pointless. We do not know, for example, whether any kinship ties existed between Hystaspes or his father, Arsames, and Gobryas and his father, Mardonius (the elder), but the fundamental point made by Hyland still stands with respect to the participants in the marriages of Darius, Mardonius, and Artostre—namely, that this was less about them than it was about their elders and the alliances they wished to forge by employing, in the case of Mardonius and Artostre, the vehicle of cross-cousin marriage.

Turning to parallel-cousin alliances, we find that although Herrenschmidt found these to be extremely rare in the totality of Greek literature concerned with the Achaemenid Persians, she did identify one within the Achaemenid descent group: the marriage between Darius,⁶¹ eldest son of Xerxes (and thus a grandson of Darius I) and Amestris, to Artaynte (Ἀρταΐντη),⁶² a daughter of Xerxes’s younger brother—that is, Darius’s paternal uncle, Masistes (Μασίστης) and his unnamed wife (Herodotus, *Hist.* 9.108.1).⁶³ The melodramatic novella built around this marriage packs much more of a punch than a simple kinship diagram of a parallel-cousin union might suggest and has all of the suspense of an opera. Indeed, Drew Griffith called the story “a quasi-Sophoclean tragedy of error.”⁶⁴

The story runs as follows: although married to Amestris, Xerxes fell in love with his brother Masistes’s unnamed wife.⁶⁵ Out of respect for his brother, Xerxes

60. Leach 1951, 24.

61. For Darius, who never succeeded his murdered father, Xerxes, but whose reign was instead usurped by his brother Artaxerxes I, see Schmitt 2011b. Griffith (2011, 310) thus erred when he identified him as “the future Darius II.”

62. For the name, see Schmitt 2011a, 114, §72.

63. Herrenschmidt 1987: 54.

64. Griffith 2011, 312. The story was, in fact, dramatized; see, e.g., Jodrell’s (1822) *The Persian Heroine: A Tragedy*.

65. Larson (2006, 241–42) noted:

Within the social context surrounding respectable women’s names . . . Herodotus’ omission of the names for Kandaules’ and Masistes’ wives emphasizes anxiety for their personal and familial *aidōs*. This interpretation accords with two of the interrelated reasons Herodotus gives for purposeful omission of names elsewhere in his work: namely, that his *logos* requires the omission and that anonymity marks the unnamed with respect. . . . Finally, by omitting the names of respectable women from . . . narratives concerning the abuse of tyranny, Herodotus not only exculpates these women from direct blame, but further implicates the male protagonists as responsible parties in their own destruction and the downfall of their dynasties.

accepted the refusal of his advances by Masistes's wife. As a kind of recompense, however, he married off his son Darius to Masistes's daughter Artaynte as a way of maintaining access to the object of his desire. Thus, this was not a parallel-cousin marriage with a "rational" political or economic motivation; rather, it was an amorous one, albeit involving Xerxes's *amour* rather than that of his son Darius.⁶⁶ While sharing his palace at Susa with Darius and Artaynte, Xerxes lusted after his daughter-in-law, and they began a relationship. Meanwhile, Xerxes received a beautiful robe from his wife, Amestris, who had woven it herself. Unfortunately, he made the mistake of appearing in it when next he saw Artaynte. Being "pleased with her," Xerxes swore a "blind oath,"⁶⁷ offering Artaynte anything she asked for. When she demanded the very robe Amestris had given him, Xerxes became fearful lest her being seen wearing it would provide proof of his affair. Consequently, Xerxes offered Artaynte cities, gold beyond measure, and an army for her own command. Still, she insisted on having the robe.⁶⁸

Learning of this, Amestris became convinced that this was not Artaynte's doing but her mother's, and on Xerxes's birthday, when the king granted gifts to those who petitioned him, Amestris asked for Artaynte's mother. Xerxes, as Herodotus says, "nodded down"⁶⁹—that is, acquiesced—and the unfortunate woman was borne away (fig. 9). Then, with the help of some of Xerxes's guards, Amestris "cut off the woman's breasts and threw them to dogs, and her nose and ears and lips likewise, and cut out her tongue, and sent her home thus cruelly used" (Herodotus, *Hist.* 9.112).

Anticipating the evil that Amestris might perpetrate, Xerxes tried to convince his brother Masistes to abandon his wife, even offering him one of his own daughters in marriage. Masistes, however, refused, replying, "What wicked word do you say to me, bidding me divorce my wife, who gave me sons and daughters, one of whom you married to your son, and who besides is very much to my mind—you bid me divorce her and marry your daughter?" (Herodotus, *Hist.* 9.113).⁷⁰ Sensing that something terrible was going to transpire, Masistes then rushed home and, after finding the mutilated body of his wife, he immediately set out with his sons for Bactria, where he hoped to raise a rebellion against his brother. Xerxes, however, had him pursued and killed. The unnamed, mutilated mother of Artaynte, one assumes, died from her wounds. Herodotus, however, never revealed the fate of Artaynte herself.

66. For an excellent discussion of the entire episode, see Müller (2006, 290–300). Cf. the long treatment in Hazewindus (2004, 83–128).

67. Fletcher 2012, 31.

68. Sancisi-Weerdenburg (1983, 29) cites Plutarch, *Artaxerxes* 5.2, on the prohibition against anyone but the king wearing the royal robe and suggests that the robe = kingship in this instance, for "the robe is surrounded by emotional feelings that completely hide its original meaning."

69. Griffith 2011: 310.

70. Cf. the discussion of this and other dramatic devices in Lang (1984, 46).



FIGURE 9. The mistreatment of Masistes' wife (*Mishandeling van de gemalinne van Mazistes, schoondogter des Persischen Koning Darius*, by Jan Luyken, 1699. Etching on paper. H: 193 mm; W: 154 mm. Rijksmuseum, RP-P-OB-44.754. <https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/deed.en>).

Unsurprisingly, commentators have read this story in many different ways. Although Heleen Sancisi-Weerdenburg proposed that it “originates from Persian oral tradition,” Drew Griffith suggested that it was inspired by the myth of Zeus and Semele.⁷¹ Erwin Wolff placed it in the genre of “harem love stories,”

71. Sancisi-Weerdenburg 1983, 28; Griffith 2011, 311.

whereas other scholars have compared it with the tales of Salomé and Esther.⁷² The whole episode has been understood as a dire portent of Xerxes's ultimate downfall via assassination, a deed committed by Artabanus, the commander of his bodyguard, but pinned on Xerxes's son Darius, for which the latter paid with his life after his younger brother Artaxerxes I found out and killed him, according to Ctesias.⁷³ Herrenschmidt noted that "the particular arrangement of this marriage and the bloody conclusion [of the story] might lead to the thought that patrilateral parallel-cousin marriages were forbidden." Although she rejected this viewpoint, she nonetheless thought that, unlike cross-cousin marriages, parallel-cousin unions were decried by the lineages that were injured by them; hence, the story of Masistes would be, if not a myth serving to illustrate the interdiction of parallel-cousin marriages, then at least a stark illustration of the evils brought about by the practice.⁷⁴

Many commentators have suggested that the story "The King's Amour, or the Death of Masistes," as Reginald Walter Macan called it,⁷⁵ is an embellished tale of lust and revenge intertwined with a genuine attempt on Masistes's part to raise a rebellion in Bactria and overthrow his corrupt brother Xerxes in the aftermath of the Persian defeat at Salamis.⁷⁶ Although Artaynte herself disappears from view just as things start to get violent, we should not lose sight of the fact that, from the perspective of young Darius, Artaynte was his father's (Xerxes) brother's (Masistes) daughter—that is, his parallel-cousin.

Parallel-cousins and parallel-cousin marriages have been the subject of many studies. For example, in his examination of parallel-cousin marriage in Iraqi Kurdish society, the Norwegian anthropologist Fredrik Barth noted that parallel-cousins paid a reduced brideprice compared to more distant kin or unrelated marriage partners, leading him to ask, "What are the advantages gained in this system by giving one's daughter to a brother's son which compensate one for the loss of the brideprice?"⁷⁷ The compensation, he decided, was first and foremost political, since Kurdish villages were "characterized by a constant struggle for political power on the part of a majority of the adult men, at times even women," and "a man can expect political support only from his agnatic relatives, those who by descent belong to his political sub-section," which segments "consist primarily of brothers, sons, and brother's sons. . . . If a man alienates his nephews by refusing them their traditional rights, he loses their political support. If he, on the other

72. Wolff 1964, 55.

73. Jacoby *Frg.* III.C. p. 464, frgs. 13–14, §§33–34. See Lenfant 2004, 127; Schmitt 2011b. In the alternative account given by Aristotle (*Politica* 1311b), Artabanus killed Darius and then Xerxes.

74. Herrenschmidt 1987, 55 and note 2.

75. Macan 1908, 812.

76. See the discussion in Müller (2006, 297–99). On the impact of Xerxes's assassination on the young Herodotus in 465 BC, see Wolff (1964, 53–54).

77. Barth 1986, 168.

hand, gives them his daughters in marriage, the ties are reinforced and lineage solidarity maintained.”⁷⁸

Decades later, the Dutch scholar Martin van Bruinessen stressed that in Kurdistan, “there is a clear preference for marriage with the father’s brother’s daughter. . . . In fact, a girl’s father’s brother’s son,” like Darius, son of Xerxes, “has the theoretical right to deny her to anyone else. . . . And if a father’s brother’s son”—think Darius—“proposes, the girl’s father”—think Masistes—“finds it difficult, if not impossible to refuse him. . . . It is evident that a consistent practice of this marriage type leads to extreme segmentariness. . . . Whereas cross-cousin marriage . . . cements multiple relationships between lineages, the strict endogamy resulting from father’s brother’s daughter marriage only enhances the segmentary character of the lineages. . . . The lineages are completely isolated; there are no affinal relations to soften the potential conflicts between them.”⁷⁹ Herrenschmidt’s assessment of the Masistes story as an illustration of the evils of parallel-cousin marriage ignored all of these important considerations, and the Kurdish example suggests that parallel-cousin marriage is a tried and true strategy deployed to forge and strengthen political alliances.

It may be argued, of course, that the ultimate tragedies in the story of Xerxes, Darius, Amestris, Masistes, his wife, and Artaynte play out on a very different plane: Xerxes brought about the destruction of his brother’s family and was eventually murdered; Masistes and his sons attempted to launch a rebellion and were all killed. The tragedy of brother-to-brother rivalry is, however, somehow banal in the context of Iranian history when, as noted earlier, Safavid, Qajar, Arsacid,⁸⁰ and of course Achaemenid, holders or contenders for the throne, did not hesitate to eliminate their rivals by the dozens, or the hundreds, although this usually occurred prior to or in the process of consolidating power. Perhaps the significance of parallel-cousin marriage, in the case of Darius and Artaynte, lies rather in the strengthening effect it would have had, but for Xerxes’s *eros*, in bolstering a segmentary lineage and shoring it up against potential threats from not-quite-so-near kin. After all, as the Dhund in Pakistan said, “Marriage with *dādā potri* (FBD) [father’s brother’s daughter] is a good marriage—if my brother has a daughter and I have a son, I will always ask for her in marriage before I ask outside. With this kind of marriage everyone is known to everyone else; I know if my brother and his daughter are good people or not and so with this marriage there is no trouble

78. Barth 1986, 393.

79. Bruinessen 1992, 72.

80. Thus, Tacitus, *Annals* 11.8: “Parthia was in a distracted state, the dispute about the sovereignty having withdrawn all attention from minor matters. For the Parthian King Gotarzes, among other cruelties, had put to death his brother Artabanus, as well as his wife and son”; and *Annals* 12.10: “the tyranny of Gotarzes . . . was intolerable alike to the nobles and to the people. He had slain his brothers, his relations, near and distant, nay, even their pregnant wives and little children. A sluggard at home, unfortunate in war, his cruelty was but a cloak for cowardice.” Cf. Karras-Klapproth 1988, 39.

afterwards. In a similar vein FBD marriage is seen as fostering good relations between two brothers.”⁸¹

Yet another issue raised in this story is that of a girl’s marriage with her paternal uncle. According to Herodotus (*Hist.* 9.111), Xerxes demanded of his brother, “you must live no longer with her who is now your wife. I give you my daughter in her place; take her for your own; but put away the wife that you have, for it is not my will that you should have her.” This was, of course, a measure of extreme desperation on Xerxes’s part, an offer made to avert what he rightly sensed would be a catastrophe, both for himself and his brother’s family.

And what of the phenomenon of “niece marriage”? Two of Darius I’s nieces—the unnamed daughter of his sister and brother-in-law Gobryas, and Phratagune, the only child of his brother Artanes—became his wives.⁸² According to Herodotus (*Hist.* 7.224), “this Artanes was brother to king Darius, and son of Hystaspes who was the son of Arsames; and when he gave his daughter in marriage to Darius he dowered her with the whole wealth of his house, she being his only child.” In the so-called Levitical Degrees which hold a prominent place in Rabbinical Law, such marriages were not only permitted but considered meritorious, the only caveat here being that they usually involved the marriage of a brother with his sister’s daughter rather than a brother with his brother’s daughter, as proposed by Xerxes to Masistes.⁸³ There is a memorable scene in Robert Graves’s *Claudius the God* in which Vitellius recommends that Claudius marry his niece Agrippinilla. Claudius protests, “But, Vitellius, she’s my niece. I can’t marry my niece, can I?” Vitellius replies by saying he’d be happy to approach the Senate for their consent and continues: “And why shouldn’t uncle and niece marry? The Parthians do it, and theirs is a very old civilization. And in the Herod family there have been more marriages between uncle and niece than any other sort.” This gives Claudius pause, and he replies, “That’s right. . . . Herodias married her uncle Philip, and then deserted him and ran off with her uncle Antipas. And Herod Agrippa’s daughter Berenice married her uncle Herod Pollio, King of Chalcis. . . . Why shouldn’t the Cæsars be as free as the Herods.” To this Vitellius says that in contrast to brother-sister incest, “it may well be that our very earliest ancestors allowed uncle and niece to marry; because there is nowhere any disgust expressed in ancient classical literature for Pluto’s marriage with his niece Proserpine.”⁸⁴

Clarisse Herrenschildt suggested that the uncle-niece marriage arranged by Artanes between his daughter Phratagune and his brother Darius was intended to conserve Artanes’s wealth within the narrowest confines of the Achaemenid dynasty, since a cross-cousin marriage would have placed that wealth in the hands

81. Donnan 1988, 128.

82. Scott 2005, 492.

83. Zschokke 1883, 50. Cf. Michaelis 1793, 310, §117.

84. Graves 1935, 480.

of the spouse's family.⁸⁵ But such a basic economic argument was not among those traditionally considered by biblical and Talmudic scholars. In the East, according to Johann David Michaelis, the relationship with the brother's daughter was not considered as close as that with the father's sister, a point underscored by the fact that in Muslim societies, relatives who could see an aunt unveiled could only see a daughter veiled.⁸⁶ In his famous study of ancient Israel, Heinrich Ewald contended that in contrast to Roman society, a father's reputation was less injured by a marriage between an uncle and a niece than by an aunt and a nephew.⁸⁷ None of these justifications is particularly satisfying; and, as Moses Mielziner noted in 1901, whereas Roman Catholic canon law, as well as English statutory law, prohibited uncle-niece marriage, "in other Protestant States of Europe such marriages are allowed. In some of the States of this country [the United States]," he wrote, "as in Ohio, Illinois, Michigan and Louisiana, they are unlawful by statute,"⁸⁸ but elsewhere they were not prohibited. In fact, whereas uncle-niece and aunt-nephew marriages are today prohibited and considered a class E felony, such marriages were legal in New York until 1893.⁸⁹

The renowned Scottish anthropologist and folklorist Sir James G. Frazer discussed uncle-niece marriage among the Hovas of Madagascar:

The king generally married, not his sister, but her daughter, his niece, and the children whom he had by her were the heirs to the throne in virtue of a twofold right, since they inherited the blood royal from their mothers as well as from their fathers. It is possible that a similar motive may explain the leave granted by some peoples to an uncle to marry his niece in the case in which the niece is his sister's daughter. Such a marriage would serve the same purpose as marriage with a sister and would be less shocking to traditional sentiment.⁹⁰

No mention is made here of a king marrying a brother's daughter.

INCESTUOUS MARRIAGE IN THE ACHAEMENID PERIOD?

The matter of uncle-niece marriage, which was sanctioned in the Bible but deemed too close for comfort in the late nineteenth-century West, brings us to the broader topic of close-kin or incestuous marriage. In 1645 the first edition of Pierre Du Ryer's French translation of Herodotus's *Histories* appeared; and, unsurprisingly, it soon became a source for enterprising authors in search of new material. One writer who delved into Herodotus's portrayal of the Persian past was the young

85. Herrenschmidt 1987, 56.

86. Michaelis (1786, 320) decided that if Mosaic law did not expressly forbid a type of marriage, it was deemed acceptable. Cf. Michaelis 1793, 312, §117.

87. Ewald 1866, 262.

88. Mielziner 1901, 40.

89. Harris et al. 2018, 177.

90. Frazer 1935, 525–26.

poet and playwright Philippe Quinault (1635–88). Two plays with strong roots in Herodotus appeared in 1656: *La mort de Cyrus* and *Le mariage de Cambise* were identified by their author as a “tragedy” and a “tragi-comedy” (figs. 10, 11).⁹¹

Discussing Quinault’s dramatic works, William Brooks suggested that “Quinault takes from his source a few ideas and names—Gobryas, Prexaspes, Megabyzus, Otanes, Phaedima, Parmys—and invents the rest, including infant substitution and the salacious thrill of possible incest.”⁹² Thus, early in act 2, scene 1 of *Le mariage de Cambise*, Atossa, the historical Udusana of the Persepolis Fortification texts⁹³—whom we know was a daughter of Cyrus and therefore a sister or half-sister of Cambyses—tells her sister Aristonne (obviously a name recalling Artystone, the historical Irtaštuna)⁹⁴ that regardless of how charming the crown might be in her eyes, she dare not touch the hand that offered it. Although Cambyses was so dear to her that he could not please her more, to call him lover was repugnant to her and to the designation of him as brother; and as attractive as marriage with him might seem to be, it must be odious, an insult to nature, an offense to the gods.⁹⁵

In Cambyses’s case, it would seem, the incest theme was not Quinault’s invention. Nevertheless, scholars have debated long and hard whether it was Herodotus’s. According to him, Cambyses had not one but two incestuous relationships with siblings, although the veracity of his claims has been questioned. First, as noted above, we are not certain who Cambyses’s mother was. She may have been Cassandane (Herodotus, *Hist.* 3.2), Amytis,⁹⁶ or Neitetic. Herodotus called Cyrus’s Egyptian wife “the new-comer from Egypt” and alleged that, as an Egyptian interloper, her presence prompted Cambyses’s decision, when he was only ten years old, to one day conquer Egypt, by way of avenging his own mother Cassandane’s honor (*Hist.* 3.3).⁹⁷ Second, neither Herodotus (*Hist.* 3.88, 7.69) nor any other source reveals who the mother or mothers of Atossa and the unidentified second daughter⁹⁸ of Cyrus were, who were said to have married Cambyses.⁹⁹ Herodotus

91. Parfaict 1746, 196; Fieux 1780, 287.

92. Brooks 2009, 181. Cf. Gros 1970, 283–84, who also commented on Quinault’s “deformation of history.”

93. Hallock 1969, 117; Henkelman and Kleber 2007, 169. Both later married Darius I, but it was the younger sister, Irtaštuna/Artystone, not Udusana/Atossa, who “was indeed considered as leading in ‘Teispid affairs,’” a point underscored by the importance of her son Iršama/Arshama. See Henkelman 2010a, 703.

94. See Henkelman 2010a.

95. Quinault 1659, 17.

96. Lenfant 2004, 118, F13.11.

97. Bichler 2001, 210.

98. As Lenfant (2019, 34) noted, “For his part, Ctesias mentions Rhoxane as a wife who gave birth to a child without a head (F 13.14). The reader does not know whether that woman is meant to equate with one of the sisters mentioned by Herodotus, but it is worth noting that she is the only wife of Cambyses to be mentioned in Ctesias’ fragments.”

99. Von Cleß 1864, 49.

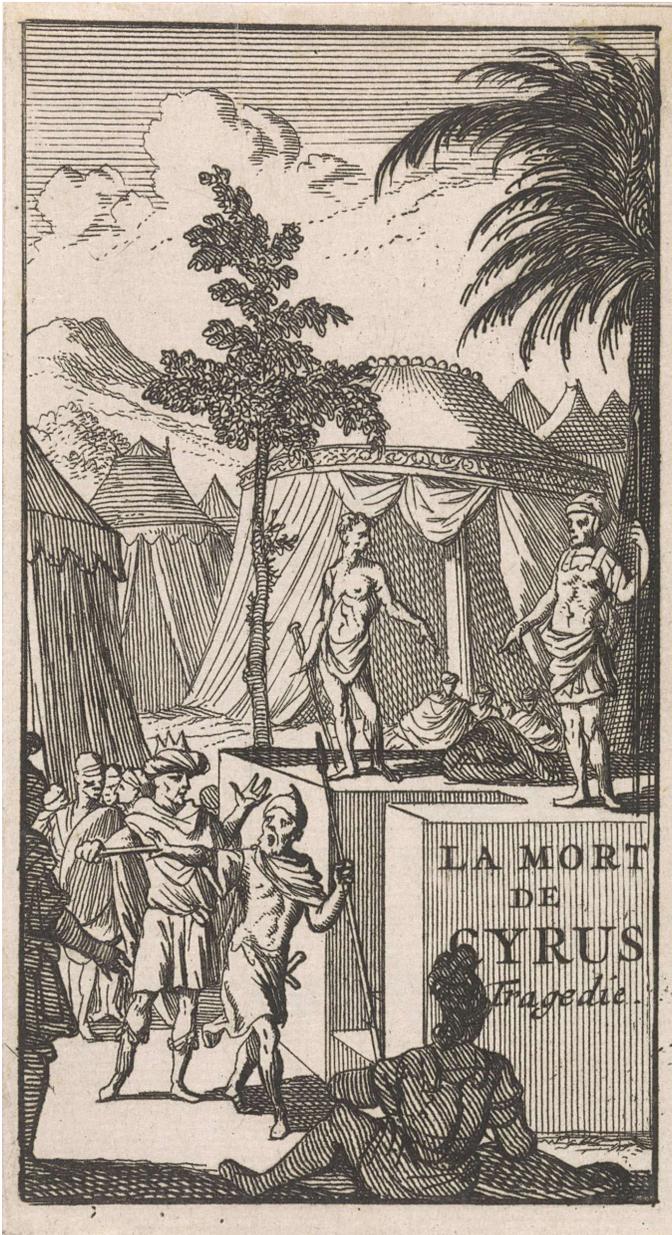


FIGURE 10. Title page of Philippe Quinault, *La mort de Cyrus*, by Caspar Luyken, 1697. Etching on paper. H: 119 mm; W: 66 mm. Rijksmuseum, RP-P-1896-A-19368-1118. <https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/deed.en>.



FIGURE 11. Title page of Philippe Quinault, *Le mariage de Cambise*, by Caspar Luyken, 1697. Etching on paper. H: 118 mm; W: 66 mm. Rijksmuseum, RP-P-1896-A-19368-1119. <https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/deed.en>.

was explicit in asserting that the younger of the two sisters whom Cambyses married, and whom he killed in Egypt, was a full sister (*Hist.* 3.31).¹⁰⁰ The fact that Atossa was not identified in this way may be at the root of the belief, sometimes found in the literature, that she was a half-sister, but this remains conjectural.¹⁰¹ Nor is there any reason to suggest, as the Lutheran theologian Christian Matthiae did in 1699, that Atossa and her unnamed sister were coerced into marrying Cambyses.¹⁰²

Although few commentators on Herodotus and the Persian empire have questioned the accusation of royal incest on the part of Cambyses, this has changed in recent years. Maria Brosius, for example, wrote:

Against the accusation of Cambyses' incestuous marriages stands Herodotus' own statement that Cambyses was married to Otanes' daughter Phaidyme, as well as Ctesias' reference to a wife named Roxane (FGrH 688 F13), whom he does not identify as a sister. Furthermore, the fact that the accusation of incest is listed in a series of sacrilegious acts committed by Cambyses, all of which are to emphasize his insanity and hubris, should caution against their existence. They derived from a common Egyptian source hostile to Cambyses, and some of these atrocities, such as the killing of the Apis bull, have been proved to be untrue.¹⁰³

Cambyses's alleged incest could, of course, be a case of slander, but if genuine, it would hardly be unique. For example, according to the *Karlamagnus Saga*, Charlemagne had an illicit liaison with his sister Gille and failed to confess this to the Abbot Egidius until the angel Gabriel brought a letter from God exposing it and ordering Charlemagne to give his sister to Milon d'Anglers in marriage. Charlemagne made Milon the Duke of Brittany, and seven months later Gille gave birth to Charlemagne's illegitimate son, the future hero Roland.¹⁰⁴ Other medieval sources simply say that Charlemagne suffered under the weight of a great, unnamed sin all his life.¹⁰⁵

Rather than dismissing Herodotus's account of Cambyses's two incestuous alliances,¹⁰⁶ some scholars have tried to understand them in an Egyptian or ancient Iranian cultural context. For example, in 1866, Adolf Rapp suggested that, in making Cambyses the creator of the tradition of brother-sister marriage among

100. For an Egyptian perspective on this episode, see Griffith 2009.

101. Wiesehöfer 2001, 84; Henkelman and Kleber 2007, 169; Binder 2008, 310; Bigwood 2009, 323. Michaelis (1786, 169) saw a major distinction in Cambyses's behavior. Herodotus qualified Cambyses's unnamed wife as his sister via both of his parents—that is, not a half-sister. When Herodotus said that, prior to Cambyses, marriage with the sister was an unknown custom among the Persians, Michaelis felt he only meant marriage with a full sister but that marriage with half-sisters had occurred.

102. Matthiae 1699, 113.

103. Brosius 2010. Cf. Hoffmann 1981, 179–80; Posener 1936, 30–47 and 171.

104. Paris 1865, 378–80.

105. Farnsworth 1913, 213–14.

106. Thus, as Bigwood (2009, 323) queried, “Even if we largely disbelieve Herodotus' account, does this mean that no part of it is based on what actually happened? . . . Likewise, we should not automatically reject Cambyses' second sister-marriage as wholly untrue.”

the Persians, Herodotus was trying to show that this was a component of the Persians' Zoroastrianism,¹⁰⁷ and in 1879 Philip Keiper proposed that Herodotus was simply trying to fix the practice in space and time for his audience.¹⁰⁸ Wilhelm Geiger, however, attributed Cambyses's incestuous marriages to the fact that he wished to keep the royal blood pure from admixture with other families,¹⁰⁹ a view later expressed by Franz Cumont as well.¹¹⁰ In 1956, K. M. T. Atkinson argued that Cambyses's marriage to his unnamed full sister, "whom he took with him to Egypt," was "in accordance with Egyptian royal tradition but by no means in accordance with Persian."¹¹¹ Citing Yima's incestuous relationship with his twin sister, Yimāk, in *Bundahišn* 23.1, Hoffmann and Vorbichler suggested that sibling marriage was a pre-Zoroastrian religious act unappreciated by Herodotus's Greek audience.¹¹² In marrying his sister, Cambyses, they argued, was mirroring the mythological act of Yima, the first man, and his sister.¹¹³ An entirely speculative scenario was envisaged by Herrenschildt, who suggested that brother-sister marriage in the Persian royal family indicated a reluctance to engage in the normal, exogamous exchange of women and might reflect friction between the Teispids and other noble families.¹¹⁴

The German ancient historian Ernst Kornemann, in contrast, was much more interested in, why, among all Indo-European-speaking peoples, the Persians, at least the royal house, followed a pattern of explicit endogamy, in contrast to the Romans, who strictly rejected it? He concluded that such a practice was a holdover from the pre-Indo-European and pre-Semitic population that had left a memory of sibling marriage in the mythology of various peoples living around the Mediterranean, a practice perpetuated only by the Persians and Egyptians.¹¹⁵ Ernst Herzfeld entertained similar views. What he termed "the endogamy of the Achaemenids" was not an ancient Iranian practice, he claimed, but rather an inheritance from the region's "Ureinwohnern" or aboriginal population—that is, the Elamites, who practiced unbridled brother-sister marriage, according to F. W. König, as discussed (and debunked) in chapter 3.¹¹⁶

107. Rapp 1866, 112.

108. Keiper 1879, 15.

109. Geiger 1882, 246. Cf. Sanjana 1888, 99–100n2.

110. Cumont 1924, 61.

111. Atkinson 1956, 176. Cf. Grätz 2004, 227n66. Note that Cambyses also adopted an Egyptian throne name. See Posener 1936, 12.

112. Carnoy 1917, 315. Cf. the discussion in Skjærvø 2012 and the literature cited there. It is not mentioned in the Avesta and is considered "another stock argument for brother-and-sister marriage." See Gray 1915, 457n3.

113. Hoffmann and Vorbichler 1980, 96; Hoffmann 1981, 189–90. Cf. Prášek 1913, 6. For an exhaustive review of creation myths involving brother-sister incest see Moore (1964, 1310).

114. Herrenschildt 1987, 57.

115. Kornemann 1925, 356.

116. Herzfeld 1938a, 255. Cf. Herrenschildt 1987, 58.

My own inclination is rather to try to understand the rare but well-attested practice of royal brother-sister marriage in a broader context. As with cross-cousin and parallel-cousin marriage, or succession to high office by a ruler's sister's son, the anthropological literature has much to contribute to a better understanding of brother-sister marriage. In 1929, the British anthropologist Brenda Z. Seligman suggested that the brother-sister incest taboo "not only prevents rivalry between brother and brother and between sister and sister, but it removes a second sphere of rivalry between father and son," thereby minimizing the risk of disharmony, fission, and violent conflict in a family.¹¹⁷ According to Reo Franklin Fortune's alliance-based approach to incest,¹¹⁸ the prohibition "is adopted not because of its internal value to the family, but because the external value of the marriage alliance is essential to social structure."¹¹⁹ Seligman rejected this logic, however, arguing that "rather than providing a new theory of incest, Fortune shows a principle for the retention of its laws and offers a sociological basis for exceptions. It would seem that society tolerates incest when the social structure has nothing to gain from its prohibition. This, however, is only partially true. Supernatural sanction has come to aid the enforcement of the law, and does not easily fade as soon as the social structure has no need for it." In fact, as Seligman stressed, in most non-Western societies "no punishment is prescribed" in cases of incest. Rather, incest triggered what she called a "supernatural sanction" that brought about "disease or death," the latter of which often took the form of suicide.¹²⁰ Although neither Herodotus nor Seligman cited Cambyses as a case in point, after reading this last statement by Seligman, I could not help but think that, for medieval and later readers of Herodotus, Cambyses's childlessness, alleged madness,¹²¹ and early death all constitute powerful arguments for seeing divine sanction as the ultimate result of his incestuous behavior.

But another perspective, raised by James Frazer (1854–1941) of *Golden Bough* fame, is also relevant. In discussing the Banyoro, a Bantu-speaking group located near Lake Albert on the present-day border of Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo, Frazer noted: "To the rule of exogamy observed by the totemic clans of the Banyoro there was one remarkable exception. Princes might cohabit with princesses and have children by them, though in such cases the couple necessarily belonged to the same totemic clan. . . . However, this cohabitation was not marriage." Citing John Roscoe, Frazer continued:

117. Seligman 1929, 246.

118. See Tylor 1889, 266–68; Leavitt 2013, 46. In fact, although Tylor is seen as providing an alliance-oriented refutation of the incest taboo, he was actually contrasting the virtues of exogamy over endogamy. Endogamy does not necessarily equate to incest.

119. Seligman 1935, 90.

120. Seligman 1935, 90–92.

121. McPhee 2018.

The rule . . . was for princes and princesses to live together promiscuously and not to regard each other as husband and wife, though the king might take a princess and keep her in his enclosure. He might even cohabit thus with his full sister and beget children by her. . . . Similarly we . . . find that among the Bahima the princes were allowed to marry their own sisters. What is the reason for these remarkable anomalies? . . . A simple and highly probable explanation of the marriage of a king or chief with his sister was long ago suggested by J. F. McLennan. Under a system of mother-kin a man's heirs are his sister's sons, and, accordingly, where that system prevails, it is the king's sister's son, not his own son, who succeeds him on the throne. . . . According to immemorial tradition a king's heirs were his sister's sons; hence, if he only married his sister, her sons would also be his; the system of maternal descent would be combined with paternal descent; time-honoured usage would be respected, while the natural instincts of a father would also be satisfied.¹²²

Clearly, McLennan, followed here by Frazer, fell into the same trap as F. W. König did when writing about Elamite incestuous marriage and, I fear, with as little success. But at least it puts König in good company, intellectually speaking.

In conclusion, I would reiterate that Herodotus and most of his readers might have been surprised by Lewis Henry Morgan's distinction between classificatory and descriptive kinship terminology, as discussed several times above. As Morgan wrote in *Ancient Society*, "consanguinei are never described, but are classified into categories, irrespective of their nearness or remoteness in degree to *Ego*; and the same term of relationship is applied to all the persons in the same category. Thus . . . my own sisters, and the daughters of my mother's sisters are all alike my sisters."¹²³ The thrust here should be obvious, particularly since Herodotus specified that Cambyses's first wife was a "full sister." The possibility must at least be entertained that all other "sisters" were potentially classificatory sisters—that is, what we would call cousins. If that is the case, then the charge of brother-sister incest in Cambyses's case may be false, and the question is less Why incest? than What kind of cousin marriage might have been involved, parallel or cross?

122. Frazer 1935, 523–25. Frazer was referring to McLennan 1865.

123. Morgan 1877, 394.