

## CYRUS AGAINST TOMYRIS

by

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ABSTRACT: Cyrus, along with the Lydian Croesus, dominates the first book of Herodotus' *Histories*. At the end of this book the author describes the Persian king's campaign against the uncivilised tribe of the Massagetae – the campaign which cost him his life. Cyrus' confrontation with the barbarous queen Tomyris, first in the form of verbal exchange and then on the battlefield, offers an opportunity to observe and compare two different characters and mentalities. The main aim of this paper is to investigate this obvious contrast by the close reading of the Herodotean account.

Herodotus, who was studious and fond of learning, shows a special interest in the queen-warriors of the barbaric world, whose power and autonomy transformed them into objects of admiration and fear, primarily for his own male audience. Queen Tomyris of the Massagetae<sup>1</sup>, a unique combination of wisdom and savagery about whom we read at the end of the first book of *Histories*, fits this description of the female figure while at the same time providing both the historian and us with enigmatic nuggets of knowledge which were commonly known within the borders of the Persian Empire<sup>2</sup>. Nevertheless, she will be mostly remembered for her crucial involvement in the death of Cyrus<sup>3</sup>, a ruler who undeniably occupies a prominent position among the early and most glorious Persian monarchs<sup>4</sup>, and dominates, together with Croesus, the pages of Herodotus' first book.

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<sup>1</sup> The Massagetae were a large and belligerent tribe living beyond the Araxes river, on the east coast of the Caspian sea, in today's Turkestan in Central Asia. See ASHERI, LLOYD, CORCELLA 2007: 212 f. (with additional bibliography); HOW, WELLS 1928: 172; MÜLLER 1997: 99.

<sup>2</sup> See PAYEN 1991: 254.

<sup>3</sup> Strabo (XI 8, 6) states that Tomyris' story was immensely popular with ancient writers and many surviving sources dealing with her indicate the truth of his words. See also GERA 1997: 187.

<sup>4</sup> Although the reign of Cyrus extends and covers almost three decades (559–530 BC), the historical value of the information available to us is highly questionable. For a more detailed elaboration on this subject, see especially PARKER, DUBBERSTEIN 1971: 14; BROSIUS 1996: 41–45; DE MIROSCHEJII 1985: 298–306. About the life and history of Cyrus, see VON FRITZ 1967: 282. As for his weddings, which offer measurable chronological footholds, see JUSTI 1963: 189 f.