

Throughout his narrative in the *Histories*, Herodotus includes small ethnographic descriptions of the cultures which came into contact with the Persians during their expansion, descriptions which ultimately relate to the overall purpose of Herodotus' work, that is to describe and explain the cause of the Greek victory over the Persians. While interpretations and explanations of these passages have varied over time, scholars do accept that the general function of the ethnographies is didactic in nature.<sup>1</sup> In her 2001 book, *Telling Wonders: Ethnographic and Political Discourse in the Work of Herodotus*, Rosaria Munson argues that by including such passages, Herodotus is placing the Greeks in a broader context, allowing them to define and assess their own language, customs, values, public and private actions, and cultural tendencies.<sup>2</sup> In this way the ethnographies act as a sort of foil for Greek customs and institutions, allowing for self-identification by comparison.

If we are to accept this interpretation and apply it to Herodotus' description of Babylon and Babylonian customs at the end of Book One,<sup>3</sup> how are we to interpret the emphasis he places on female royal figures and their feats of engineering? This particular passage is notably lacking in praise (or even description) of male political figures or their contributions to the city of Babylon and its wider kingdom. He instead defers his discussion of male Babylonian royalty to a later description of the history of Assyria, and draws the audience's attention to two specific queens and their fortification of the city, not only by means of altering the landscape, but specifically by their manipulation of water in order to fortify their city and kingdom.<sup>4</sup> While there is no single framework with which to explain the ways Herodotus portrays all women in his work, I argue that the Babylonian queens, Semiramis and Nitocris, serve as examples of the idea that matrilineal succession and the connection between feminine power and monarchy, especially that of the East, are a sign of the institutional weakness of monarchy, thus reinforcing Greek ideas of political structure and gender organization by inherently associating democracy with masculinity. This ultimately contributes to Herodotus' overall explanation of the downfall of the Persians, a monarchical empire from the east.

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<sup>1</sup> See Lateiner (1998); Thomas (2000); Munson (2001).

<sup>2</sup> p. 272.

<sup>3</sup> 1.177-200.

<sup>4</sup> 1.184.

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