

CUSTOMS OF THE PERSIANS - 430 B. C.

Herodotus

The Greek historian Herodotus spent decades of his life writing an account of the great wars that had taken place between the Greeks and the Persians between 499 and 479 b.c. In addition to explaining the background and course of the wars, his *History* also describes the Persian Empire and Persian customs and traditions, as the following excerpt illustrates. Historians today believe that Herodotus drew on the work of earlier historians as well as his own observations from his extensive travels throughout Greece, Persia, and North Africa. Herodotus is often referred to as the father of history.

“ The customs which I know the Persians to observe are the following. They have no images of the gods, no temples, nor altars, and consider the use of them a sign of folly. This comes, I think, from their not believing the gods to have the same nature with men, as the Greeks imagine. Their want, however, is to ascend to the summits of the loftiest mountains and there to offer sacrifice to Zeus [Iranian Ahura-Mazda¹], which is the name they give to the whole circuit of the firmament.

To these gods the Persians offer sacrifice in the following manner: they raise no altar, light no fire, pour no libations; there is no sound of the flute, no putting on of chaplets, no consecrated barley cake; but the man who wishes to sacrifice brings his victim to a spot of ground which is free from pollution, and then calls upon the name of the god to whom he intends to offer. The one making the sacrifice is not allowed to pray for blessings on himself alone, but he prays for the welfare of the king and of the whole Persian people, among whom he is of necessity included. He cuts the victim in pieces, and having boiled the flesh, he lays it out upon the tenderest herbage he can find, trefoil especially.

When all is ready, one of the Magi² comes forward and chants a hymn, which they say recounts the origin of the gods. It is not lawful to offer a sacrifice unless there is a Magi present. After waiting a short time the one sacrificing carries the flesh of the victim away with him, and makes whatever use of it he may please.

It is also their general practice to deliberate affairs of significance when they are drunk; and then the next day, when they are sober, they are brought together to reconsider decisions to which they came to the night before by the master of the house in which it the decision was made; and if it is then approved of, they act upon it; if not, they set it aside.

When they meet each other in the street, you may know if the persons meeting are of equal rank by the following : if they are, instead of speaking, they kiss each other on the lips. In the case where one is a little inferior to the other, the kiss is given on the cheek; where the difference of rank is great, the inferior prostrates himself upon the ground.

Of nations, they honor most their nearest neighbors, whom they esteem next to themselves; those who live beyond these they honor in the second degree. There is also no nation which so readily adopts foreign customs as the Persians. This was the greatest weakness of the Persians, and the chief cause of their decline. Thus, they have taken the dress of the Medes³, considering it superior to their own; and in war they wear the Egyptian breastplate. As soon as they hear of any luxury, they instantly make it their own.

Next to prowess in arms, it is regarded as the greatest proof of manly excellence, to be the father of many sons. Every year the king sends rich gifts to the man who can show the largest number; for they hold that number is strength. Their sons are carefully instructed from their fifth to their twentieth year, in three things alone,—to ride, to draw the bow, and to speak the truth. Until their fifth year they are not allowed to come into the sight of their father, but pass their lives with the women. This is done that, if the child die young, the father may not be afflicted by its loss.

To my mind it is a wise rule, as also is the following—that the king shall not put any one to death for a single fault, and that none of the Persians shall visit a single fault in a slave with any extreme penalty; but in every case the services of the offender shall be set against his misdoings; and if the latter be found to outweigh the former, the aggrieved party shall then proceed to punishment.

They hold it unlawful to talk of anything which it is unlawful to do. The most disgraceful thing in the world, they think, is to tell a lie, the next worse to owe a debt, because among other reasons, the debtor is obliged to tell lies. ”

1. Ahura Mazda: Persian god of truth and light
2. Magi (Magus, sing.): Persian priest
3. Medes: inhabitants of Media (now northern Iran)

Source: Excerpt from Histories by Herodotus, Book I, translated by George Rawlinson, in Readings in Ancient History, Volume 1, edited by William Stearns Davis (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1912), pp. 58–60.

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