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THEMISTOCLES' PERSIAN TAPESTRY

A whole series of Greeks, outstanding and ordinary, came to the king's court in Persia in the classical period,[1] but only one, Themistocles, is said to have learned the Persian language.[2] Ancient authors were quite interested in Themistocles' language skills and accounts of his mastery of Persian are found in a wide variety of sources. These different versions illuminate ancient ideas on language acquisition and the implications of learning a foreign language, as well as the uses to which the mastery of a foreign tongue can be put.

Our earliest source for Themistocles' acquisition of Persian is also our most reliable one—Thucydides. Unfortunately, this particular section of Thucydides (1.126–38; especially 1.135–8) is uncharacteristically imaginative and fanciful, and it is almost as if Herodotus and not Thucydides is the one narrating the story of Themistocles' end.[3] Thucydides tells a colourful tale of Themistocles' flight from the Athenians, who wish to bring him home to be tried for treason, and of his plan to escape to Persia. The historian then reproduces a letter (1.137.4) allegedly written by Themistocles to the Persian king Artaxerxes. 'I Themistocles have come to you' (*Θεμιστοκλῆς ἥκω παρὰ σέ*), the letter opens. Themistocles briefly mentions both the evil and the good he has done the king's father, Xerxes, in the past, and promises to benefit Artaxerxes as well. 'I wish, however,' concludes the letter, 'for a year's grace and then to explain to you in person the reasons for my coming' (*βούλομαι δ' ἐνιαυτὸν ἐπισχὼν αὐτός σοι περὶ ὧν ἥκω δηλῶσαι*)**.** The king approves of this plan and Themistocles then takes a year's sabbatical in order to learn the Persian language—as best he could, Thucydides adds (*τῆς τε Περσίδος γλώσσης ὅσα ἐδύνατο κατενόησε*, 1.138.1). He devotes the year to the study of local practices as well (*καὶ τῶν ἐπιτηδευμάτων τῆς χώρας*). Once the Athenian arrives at the Persian court, he becomes, according to Thucydides, a prominent figure, the most influential Greek ever to spend time at Persia, chiefly because he gave constant proof of his intelligence (*μάλιστα δὲ ἀπὸ τοῦ πεῖραν διδοὺς ξυνετὸς φαίνεσθαι*, 1.138.2).

[1] J. Hofstetter, *Die Griechen in Persien: Prosopographie der Griechen im persischen Reich vor Alexander* (Berlin, 1978) is a prosopography of all the Greeks in Persia down to the time of Alexander, based on Greek literary sources. J. Seibert, *Die politischen Flüchtlinge und Verbannten in der griechischen Geschichte* (Darmstadt, 1979), 393 lists over forty names of Greek exiles at the Persian court; see too M. C. Miller, *Athens and Persian in the Fifth Century BC: A Study in Cultural Receptivity* (Cambridge, 1997), 97–108.

[2] Athenaeus (12.535e), reports that Alcibiades learned Persian, but this 'may be a later fiction resulting from a perceived parallel with the life of Themistocles' (Miller [n. 1], 131). In Herodotus (6.29.2), Histiaeus speaks Persian at a crucial juncture, stating in the Persian language that he is Histiaeus the Milesian (*Περσίδα γλῶσσαν μετιεὶς καταμηνύει ἑωυτὸν ὡς εἴη Ἱστιαῖος ὁ Μιλήσιος*), just as he is about to be killed by a Persian soldier. That does not seem to require much Persian, as Miller notes; see too P. Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander: A History of the Persian Empire*, trans. P. T. Daniels (Winona Lake, IN, 2002), 508–9. Even if we accept that Alcibiades studied Persian and Histiaeus knew it, only in the case of Themistocles are we provided with a rich array of sources on what learning Persian entails.

[3] See S. Hornblower, *A Commentary on Thucydides* (Oxford, 1991), 1.202–3, 211–12 and the further references there.

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The essentials of Thucydides' report are, then, that Themistocles deliberately delayed his trip to the king's court for a year in order to study Persian and he learned the language 'as best he could'. It sounds as if the purpose of his studies is twofold: he wishes to become acquainted with the language and customs of what will be his new country and also wants to be able to speak to the king in person (αὐτός), without recourse to intermediaries. Themistocles is, of course, in a particularly vulnerable position, coming to the son of a king[4] whom he has tricked and soundly defeated. The Greek leader needs to rely on his wits and powers of persuasion in order to talk his way out of an awkward and potentially dangerous situation; we can well understand why he wishes to explain his worth as an ally to the Persian king in his own words.

Themistocles was not the only notable Greek who put in an appearance at the Persian court in classical times, nor was he the only Greek to ally himself with a former enemy. Pausanias, Themistocles' Spartan counterpart in Thucydides (1.128–35), is another Greek war hero who subsequently goes over to the Persian king. Pausanias adopts Persian dress, food, bodyguards, and ostentation, but does not learn the language. Demaratus, Hippias and Alcibiades, to name just a few, also sought the protection of the king at Persia.[5] Entimos is specifically said to have emulated Themistocles in visiting the Great King, Artaxerxes I, and was honoured by the king with generous gifts, but we hear nothing of him studying Persian.[6] Why did Themistocles, alone of all these visiting and defecting Greeks, decide to learn the Persian tongue?[7]

For a start, although the majority of Greeks were notoriously uninterested in foreign languages, Themistocles may have been acquainted with an additional language from his earliest childhood, for in some sources his mother is said to have been a non-Greek, possibly Carian or Thracian.[8] He is undoubtedly sensitive to the meaning and use of language, for he knows how to interpret the riddling words of oracles, demonstrating that the use of the 'gentle' (cf. ἠπίως) vocative 'O divine Salamis' (ὦ θεία Σαλαμίς) indicates that the wooden walls oracle was not directed against the Athenians (Hdt. 7.143). Themistocles also knows how to use language difference to his own advantage. In the course of his campaign against the Persians, Themistocles makes use of the fact that the Persians' allies, the Ionians, are Greek-speaking. Herodotus (8.22) tells us that Themistocles has inscriptions carved on rocks in the coastal area around Artemisium. These inscriptions, written in Greek, are addressed to the Ionians, calling upon them to join their fellow Greeks and desert the Persian forces. Herodotus suggests that Themistocles may have had a dual

[4] The question of which king—Xerxes or Artaxerxes—Themistocles met was already debated in antiquity; see Plut. *Them*. 27.1. A. Keaveney, *The Life and Journey of the Athenian Statesman Themistocles (524–460 BC?) as a Refugee in Persia* (Lewiston, NY, 2003), 24–5, 102–4 with 138–9 (nn. 146–56) and 160–1 (nn. 608–30) is a recent survey of modern scholarship on the question.

[5] Hdt. 6.70; Thuc. 6.5, 8.47; see the references in n. 1 above. Perhaps Metiochus son of Miltiades, who is said to have settled in Persian and married a Persian woman (Hdt. 6.41) learned Persian, but we hear nothing of this in ancient sources.

[6] Ath. 2. 48c = Phainias, *FGrH* 1012 F21= F27 Wehrli.

[7] M. Dubuisson, 'Remarques sur le vocabulaire grec de l'acculturation', *RBPh* 60 (1982), 5–32, at 15–16 interestingly notes that there is no term in Greek to denote the acquisition of barbarian culture or language by a Greek.

[8] Themistocles' mother is from Caria, Thrace or Acharnania: Plut. *Them*. 1.1–2; Nepos, *Them*. 1.2. See further J. K. Davies, *Athenian Propertied Families* (Oxford, 1971), 211–20 and F. J. Frost, *Plutarch's Themistocles: A Historical Commentary* (Princeton, 1980), 61–2 (*ad* Plut. *Them*. 1.1–2). For the Greeks' lack of linguistic curiosity, see T. Harrison, 'Herodotus' conception of foreign languages', *Histos* 2 (1998), at n. 29 and the further references there.

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purpose in leaving such messages behind: first, he could, perhaps, persuade the Ionians to change sides and join their fellow Greeks. Second, if the Persian king were to learn of these inscriptions in Greek, he would then distrust the Ionians and not allow them to participate in the forthcoming naval battle. Here we see Themistocles playing one language against another, using the mutual lack of understanding and suspicion inherent in a polyglot army in order to set Greek-speaker against Persian-speaker and convince the Persians that the Ionians cannot be trusted. Themistocles, it seems, can utilize language difference in a Machiavellian way.[9]

Let us see what happens to Thucydides' account of a letter written by Themistocles to the Persian king at the hands of later writers, in more or less chronological order. Nepos, writing in the first century B.C.E., follows Thucydides fairly closely in his biography of Themistocles, but cannot resist improving upon the Greek's linguistic skills. Nepos' Themistocles (*Them*. 10.1) also writes to the Persian king in advance of his arrival and is granted a year's leave. He devotes the entire year (*omne illud tempus*) to the literature and language of the Persians (*litteris sermonisque Persarum se dedit*) and becomes so well-versed in Persian that when he actually appears before the king, his spoken Persian is reportedly even better than that of the natives (*quibus adeo eruditus est, ut multo commodius dicatur apud regem verba fecisse quam ii poterant qui in Perside erant nati*). Most modern commentators think that Nepos is simply exaggerating, but it has been suggested that Nepos should be believed, because those who carefully study a second language are more likely to follow its grammatical niceties than are native speakers.[10] It is interesting that Nepos not only grants Themistocles fluent, grammatical Persian, but also has him study Persian literature. It seems that for Nepos mastering a language involves learning its literature as well. Such literary knowledge, presumably, would then explain Themistocles' elegant Persian style.[11] Some scholars take Nepos' word *litteris* (or *litterae)* to refer to writing; this would mean that Themistocles learned not literature, but some form of writing. Such writing could have been the old Persian cuneiform script used only for the royal Achaemenian inscriptions or perhaps the Aramaic script which was used for correspondence; perhaps even both. In a work dated a century or two after Nepos, an anonymous

[9] See too Plut. *Them*. 9.2. Herodotus (9.98.2) compares Themistocles' behaviour to that of Leotychides at Mycale, who uses a similar ploy and calls out to the enemy Ionians in Greek. He assigns mixed motives to Leotychides as well.

[10] See K. Mayer, 'Themistocles, Plutarch, and the voice of the other', in C. Schrader, V. Ramon and J. Vela (edd.), *Plutarco y la Historia* (Zaragoza, 1997), 297–304, at 301, n. 11. It is worth comparing the alleged linguistic skills of Mithridates, as attested by Aulus Gellius (17.17): Mithridates speaks no fewer than twenty-five languages, each with as much skill as a native speaker (*proinde lingua et oratione ipsius non minus scite quam si gentilis eius esset, locutus est*). Other figures provide counter-instances to such perfect command of foreign languages. Anacharsis admits that he speaks broken Greek, but reminds the Athenians that they will sound bad in Scythia (e.g. *Ep*. 1: *Ἀνάχαρσις παρ' Ἀθηναίοις σολοικίζει, Ἀθηναῖοι δὲ παρὰ Σκύθαις*; see too the apophthegmata A4B–C and A5A–C in J. F. Kindstrand, *Anacharsis: The Legend and the Apophthegmata* [Uppsala, 1981], 108). According to Xenophon, the Thracian ruler Seuthes knew quite a bit of Greek but kept an interpreter handy (*ἐν ἐπηκόῳ εἱστήκει ἔχων ἑρμηνέα ξυνίει δὲ καὶ αὐτὸς ἑλληνιστὶ τὰ πλεῖστα*, *Anab*. 7. 6. 8); occasionally he needed some help (7.3.24–5).

[11] See, e.g. K. Nipperdey, *Cornelius Nepos*, 9th edn. (Berlin, 1885) on Nep. *Them*. 10.1: *litteris sermonisque*, 'Er las persische Schriften und sprach viel mit Persern in ihrere Sprache.' Cf. Dubuisson (n. 7), 16 who does not find in Nepos' text any indication that Themistocles had any interest in Persian culture *per se*. Harrison (n. 8), text near n. 17 sees Themistocles' language skills as 'yet another reflection of his special intelligence, the object rather of awe than imitation'.

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collection of letters allegedly written by Themistocles himself,[12] the Greek is acquainted with the two forms of writing used in Persia, ancient Assyrian, that is Aramaic writing (*τὰ Ἀσσύρια τὰ παλαιὰ γράμματα*) *and* the new Achaemenian cuneiform script recently introduced by Darius (*ἃ Δαρεῖος ὁ πατὴρ Ξέρξου Πέρσαις ἔναγχος ἔγραψε*, *Them. Epistles* 21).[13] Nonetheless, it seems likely that Nepos intends *litterae* to mean Persian literature, and not writing. Such Persian literature would, in fact, have been almost entirely oral in the time of Themistocles—we know of prose tales and perhaps some form of epic poetry—but Nepos himself may have not been aware of that.[14]

Our next source, Diodorus of Sicily (11.56–7), has a particularly picturesque version of Themistocles' arrival in Persia. The Greek is transported to Persia in a closed, decorative wagon, a wagon normally used for conveying ladies of the harem to the king's court. Other travellers kept well away from the passengers in such carriages, Diodorus tells us.[15] It is tempting to linger on this detail and depict a demeaned, feminized Themistocles who now has to flatter and fawn on the Persian king, virtually seducing him. But, in fact, Diodorus' Themistocles holds his own with the king when he arrives at court. He immediately explains his conduct to the Persian and quickly wins a royal pardon. Here we find Themistocles conversing with the king *before* he has learned Persian; he only begins to study the Persian language after his initial meeting with the king, when he has to face a series of prosecutors at a trial. Diodorus tells us that a crowd of aristocratic Persians demand that Themistocles be punished for killing their loved ones. They are led by the king's sister Mandane, who is dressed in widow's weeds.[16] The king arranges for a jury of noble Persians to try Themistocles and states that their verdict will be final. Themistocles manages to learn Persian while the trial is being prepared and he then defends himself in that language, apparently most eloquently, for he is acquitted. The overjoyed Persian king proceeds to grant him a multitude of gifts. This story, found in the first century B.C.E. historian Diodorus, may well go back to the fourth century account of Ephorus, but commentators are agreed that, whatever the source, the story is an invention, pure and simple.[17] It is

[12] For the date of the *Letters*, see P. A. Rosenmeyer, *Ancient Epistolary Fictions* (Cambridge 2001), 231 with n. 78, who points out that the collection contains a considerable amount of earlier material.

[13] See C. Nylander, 'Assyria grammmata: remarks on the 21st "Letter of Themistocles"', *Opuscula Atheniensia* 8 (1968), 119–36, esp. 123, n. 18 (and compare Briant [n. 2], 889). M.-F. Baslez, *L'Étranger dans la Grèce antique* (Paris, 1984), 186, assumes that the language learnt by Themistocles was Aramaic. Compare Thuc. 4.50.2 where the Greeks have Persian dispatches written in *Ἀσσύρια γράμματα*, i.e. Aramaic (and not Old Persian), translated; see Hornblower (n. 3), 207 ad loc.

[14] For the evidence for Persian literature in the time of Themistocles, see D. L. Gera, *Xenophon's Cyropaedia* (Oxford, 1993), 13–22.

[15] Diod. 11.56.7; cf. Plut. *Artax.* 27.1 and see, e.g. Hdt. 7.83.2; Xen. *An.* 1.2.16; *Cyr.* 6. 4.11. M. Brosius, *Women in Ancient Persia (559–331 BC)* (Oxford, 1996), 88–9 has other references to such closed opulent carriages, known as *ἁρμάμαξαι*, which were used to convey wealthy Persian women (and men).

[16] Mandane had lost her sons when Themistocles defeated the Persians at Salamis; compare Phanias' account (Plut. *Them.* 13.2–5= *FGrH* 1012 F19= fr. 25 Wehrli) where Themistocles is said to have sacrificed three sons of Xerxes' sister, Sandake, before the battle of Salamis. Brosius (n. 15), 71–2, n. 52 suggests that Mandane and Sandake may well be the same person, with the stories of Diodorus and Phanias two versions of the same event; see too C. Cooper, 'Phaenias of Eresus on Solon and Themistocles', *EMC* 39 (1995), 323–35, at 330–1.

[17] For Ephorus as Diodorus' source here, see, e.g. A. J. Podlecki, *The Life of Themistocles* (London, 1975), 92–9, who notes that Ephorus, in turn, may have used Ctesias' *Persica* as his

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especially interesting that Themistocles learns Persian in order to engage in the most Athenian of pursuits: going to court.[18] Here he must be capable of expressing himself properly and persuasively in front of a jury of Persian nobles, rather than before the king.

None of our sources so far has provided any clues as to *how* Themistocles managed to master Persian, but two first-century C.E. Latin writers, Valerius Maximus and Quintilian, link Themistocles' acquisition of Persian to his phenomenal memory. Indeed, the Greek leader was renowned in the ancient world for his powers of memory. There is a story that the poet Simonides once offered to teach Themistocles a technique for improving his memory, but Themistocles replied that he would rather be taught the art of forgetting instead. 'I remember even what I do not want to remember, but am unable to forget what I want to forget', he complained.[19] Quintilian (11.2.50) tells of Themistocles learning Persian in the course of urging his readers to cultivate their memories. He brings a series of examples of historical figures who had extraordinary memories: Mithridates knew the twenty-two languages spoken in his empire,[20] Crassus completely mastered five different Greek dialects, Cyrus the Great knew the name of every soldier in his army, and Themistocles, says Quintilian, is said to have spoken excellently in Persian after a year's study (*Themistocles . . . quem unum intra annum optime locutum esse Persice constat*).[21] Here we find an implicit assumption common to many ancient thinkers: language is simply a collection of names or words. To learn a language is to remember great quantities of words and syntax plays no part at all in this scheme of things. It also seems as if Quintilian thinks that a year is a very short time in which to learn to speak excellently (*optime*).

Valerius Maximus (8.7 ext. 15) mentions Themistocles' acquisition of Persian when describing his diligence and industry. Busy as Themistocles was, he managed to remember the names of all his fellow citizens. And when he was forced to find refuge with Xerxes, he learned the Persian language, investing a great deal of commendable effort in order to bring to the royal ears a familiar, accustomed sound of voice (*Persico sermone se adsuefecit, ut labore parta commendatione regiis auribus familiarem et adsuetum sonum vocis adhiberet*). Here, learning a foreign tongue is a matter of application and hard work, and there is a strong link between learning names and learning a language. First Themistocles memorizes the names of his fellow citizens; next he learns the names or words of the Persian tongue. The purpose of such labour is to address the king with familiar words and sounds, in essence to ingratiate oneself by means of the sound and form of the words, rather than their content. In Thucydides, Nepos and Diodorus, Themistocles learns Persian in order to bend words to his will and save his own life, for he needs to present subtle and persuasive argu-

source for the trial story. Frost (n. 8), 216, thinks that Diodorus' account of a trial is 'nonsense', while Briant (n. 2), 901, finds it 'scarcely credible'. Keaveney (n. 4), 40–2, on the other hand, argues (rather unconvincingly) that 'some knowledge of the Persian court' can be traced in Diodorus' account. Briant notes the presence here of the motif of the Persian royal woman who demands the punishment of a rebel guilty of killing her children. Parysatis (*FGrH* 688 F16.66–7 and F26.15–16) is one such woman; Intaphrenes' wife (Hdt. 3.117), too, seems to be lurking in the background.

[18] As noted by Mayer (n. 10), 301.

[19] Cic. *De or*. 2.299 and 351; *Fin*. 2.104; see too A*cad. Pr.* 2.2.

[20] For Mithridates' knowledge of languages compare Plin. *HN* 7.88, 25.67 and n. 10 above. Compare too Cleopatra who spoke twenty-five languages according to Plutarch (*Ant*. 27.3–4). Harrison (n. 8), text near n. 25 suggests that the knowledge of foreign languages displayed by Mithridates and Cleopatra was a function of their status as dangerous enemies of Rome.

[21] Aristodemus (*FGrH* 104 F10.4) also speaks of a year's study.

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ments about his past actions. According to Valerius Maximus, however, Themistocles masters the language simply in order to please the Persian king, by addressing him with accustomed sounds. Language is viewed here virtually as the equivalent of music: sound, rather than sense, is the chief feature.

Not all ancient sources see Themistocles' mastery of Persian as the product of diligence and hard work. In the anonymous *Letters of Themistocles*, which we have already encountered (above, p. 448), Themistocles does not actually study Persian. He simply absorbs the language from his fellow passengers on his journey to Persia, picking it up, as it were, with no effort at all (*ἤδη ἀπὸ τῶν συνόδων καὶ τῆς Περσίδος φωνῆς ἀντελαμβανόμην*, *Ep.* 20.30). Here, the Greek learns to speak Persian with no particular teacher,[22] no visible expenditure of energy, and in less than a year's time.[23] Once Themistocles of the *Letters* arrives at the king's court, he wins him over by guile (*ἀπάτην*, *Ep.* 20.33). He relates that he often speaks to the king in Persian and his mastery of the language leads the king to present him with a golden sword and a Persian cloak woven with gold (*καί μοι βασιλεὺς αὐτός, ἐπεὶ καὶ τῇ Περσῶν αὐτὸν ἤδη φωνῇ πολλὰ ἠμειβόμην, χρυσοῦν τε δωρεῖται ἀκινάκην καὶ Περσικὴν ἐσθῆτα χρυσοῦ ὑφαντήν*, *Ep.* 20.37).

Woven materials feature in our next source, Plutarch, as well. His Themistocles[24] adduces a lovely image, the Persian textiles or tapestry of my title. According to Plutarch, Themistocles is conveyed to Persia in one of the closed harem wagons, as in Diodorus' account; passers-by are told that there is a young Greek woman (*γύναιον Ἑλληνικόν*, Plut. *Them* 26.6) inside. When he arrives in Persia, Themistocles is first interviewed by the king's audience master, Artabanus.[25] Artabanus warns the Greek that if he wishes to speak to the king he must prostrate himself before him:

> Men's customs differ but all agree that it is best to uphold the customs of one's own country. You Greeks are said to admire liberty and equality above all else. For us, on the other hand, the noblest of our customs is to honour the king and prostrate oneself before him as an image of the god who preserves the whole world. (*Them*. 27. 3)

Themistocles readily agrees to perform the act of *προσκύνησις* and expresses no moral or cultural qualms about adopting this ceremonial gesture of submission. (Elsewhere, of course, we hear of Greeks who have to be physically forced to bow down; others use tricks such as throwing a ring to the ground and then picking it up,

[22] Keaveney (n. 4), 143, n. 228, has two suggestions as to who taught Themistocles Persian before he came to the king's court: the anonymous Persian who travelled up country with him (Thuc. 1.137.3) or his children's *paidagogus*, Sicinnus, whom Plutarch (*Them*. 12.4) describes as *τῷ . . . γένει Πέρσης*; see too Hdt. 8.75. Most commentators think that Sicinnus is Phrygian and not Persian, because of his name.

[23] Cf. H. S. Gehman, *The Interpreters of Foreign Languages among the Ancients* (Diss. University of Pennsylvania, 1914), 18: 'In his [sc. Themistocles'] day there were no grammars, lexicons, and chrestomathies, and a man who wished to study a foreign language had many disadvantages not existing in our day. The most natural way of acquiring a foreign speech was to live in a district where several tongues were spoken . . .'.

[24] This section of Plutarch's *Themistocles* (26–9), known as the Themistocles Romance, is thought to be based chiefly on the dramatic account of Phanias of Lesbos (*FGrH* 1012 F17–22 = frr. 23–8 Wehrli). See L. Bodin, 'Histoire et biographie: Phainias d'Erèse', *REG* 28 (1915), 251–81, esp. 261–81; Frost (n. 8), 209–11; Cooper (n. 16), 331–2.

[25] This story presents chronological difficulties: Artabanus assassinated Xerxes in 465 and was killed when trying to remove Artaxerxes I from the throne. According to most scholars, Themistocles came to the court of Artaxerxes in 465/464 B.C.E.; see Frost (n. 8), 215 with n. 24 and see above, n. 4.

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in order to avoid the impression of actually doing obeisance).[26] Themistocles is more than willing to bow down, and he (perhaps deceptively) promises Artabanus that through his efforts even more men will be prostrating themselves before the king in the future. There is, it seems, a parallel between Themistocles' willingness to perform *proskynesis* and his desire to learn Persian. He is pragmatic and realizes that different countries have different languages and different customs. Indeed, it should be recalled (above, p. 445), that Thucydides has Themistocles spend his year's sabbatical learning Persian practices, in addition to his language studies.[27] Ultimately, it is most useful to approach the king and his court on their own terms.

Plutarch relates that Themistocles is then granted an audience with the king. In this first encounter, Themistocles pleads for his life, but speaks to the king through interpreters.[28] It is only at the second meeting between Artaxerxes and the Greek that the question of learning Persian arises. Artaxerxes reassures Themistocles about his safety and invites him to speak with complete frankness (*παρρησιαζόμενον*) and say whatever he wishes about Greek affairs. Themistocles' response is worth quoting in full:

ὁ δὲ Θεμιστοκλῆς ἀπεκρίνατο, τὸν λόγον ἐοικέναι τοῦ ἀνθρώπου τοῖς ποικίλοις[29] *στρώμασιν· ὡς γὰρ ἐκεῖνα καὶ τοῦτον ἐκτεινόμενον μὲν ἐπιδεικνύναι τὰ εἴδη, συστελλόμενον δὲ κρύπτειν καὶ διαφθείρειν· ὅθεν αὐτῷ χρόνου δεῖν.*

Themistocles replied that human speech is like embroidered tapestries. Like them, it, too, displays its patterns only when it is well spread out, but when it is rolled up, it conceals and distorts them. For this reason, he needed time. (Plut. *Them*. 29.3)

The king, we are told was delighted with the simile.[30] Indeed, although Themistocles speaks Greek here, he uses terms that the king will well understand, for the Persians were famous for their finely wrought textiles. Persian clothing, carpets, tapestries, and wall-hangings were considered great luxury items in the Greek world.[31] Elsewhere, we are told that this same Persian king, Artaxerxes, sent another Greek who came to his court a silver-footed bed and rich coverings (*στρώματα πολυτελῆ*). Artaxerxes sent along a slave as well, to spread these coverings, explaining that the Greeks know nothing about using such tapestries (*φάσκων οὐκ ἐπίστασθαι τοὺς*

[26] See Hdt. 7.136.1; Nepos, *Conon* 3 and Justin 6.2.12–13; Plut. *Artax*. 22.8 and Ael. *VH* 1.21. See too Briant (n. 2), 222–3 and Keaveney (n. 4), 46–9 for a discussion of the exact ceremony and its meaning.

[27] Compare Herodotus' account of the kidnapped Athenian women who teach their children the Attic tongue and Athenian ways (*γλῶσσάν τε τὴν Ἀττικὴν καὶ τρόπους τοὺς Ἀθηναίων*, 6.138.2).

[28] Gomme on Thuc. 1.137.4 nicely notes how later writers (such as Plutarch and Diodorus) transform the letter in Thucydides' account into a speech before the king, but none the less retain the letter's impressive opening *ἥκω παρὰ σέ*. This revision entails a first meeting between the two where Themistocles does not know Persian and must request permission to learn the language directly from the king, face to face.

[29] Note how the word *ποικίλος* is used slightly earlier in Plutarch's account. As Themistocles heads towards his second audience with the king, Roxanes the chiliarch growls at him 'You cunning Greek snake' (*ὄφις Ἕλλην ὁ ποικίλος*, 29.2).

[30] We find a simile of a very different sort when the Indian philosopher Mandanis (or Dandamis) compares the process of comprehending speech which has gone through three interpreters, to expecting water to flow purely through mud (*ὅμοιον γάρ, ὡς ἂν εἰ διὰ βορβόρου καθαρὸν ἀξιοῖ τις ὕδωρ ῥεῖν*, Strabo 15.1.64).

[31] See, e.g Hdt. 9.80, 82; Ar. *Frogs* 938; Xen. *Hell*. 4.1.30; *Cyr*. 5.5.7, 8.8.16 etc. and Miller (n. 1), 55 and 75–81.

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῾Έλληνας ὑποστρωννύειν).[32] Themistocles may have admired the rich and soft textiles found in the wagon, the *harmamaxa* in which he travelled to Persia, according to Plutarch.[33] He also could have been inspired by his immediate surroundings, the tapestries which decorated the audience chamber of the royal palace and adorned the king's walls. These palace tapestries may have pictured popular Iranian tales or even historical scenes.[34]

Artaxerxes grants Themistocles a year's time, and the Greek learns Persian sufficiently well (ἀποχρώντως ἐκμαθών) to be capable of speaking with the king face to face, with no intermediary present (ἐνετύγχανε βασιλεῖ δι' αὑτοῦ). Plutarch goes on to say that while those on the outside thought that Artaxerxes and Themistocles were speaking only of Greek affairs, the king then introduced so many changes in his court that Persian nobles began to suspect that Themistocles had the audacity to use his free exchanges with the king against them (ὡς καὶ κατ' ἐκείνων παρρησίᾳ χρῆσθαι πρὸς αὐτὸν ἀποτετολμηκώς, 29.4).

What can we learn from this passage of Plutarch? For a start, it seems that open and frank conversation, *parrhesia*, with a ruling monarch demands great caution, and Themistocles, who used Greek when pleading his own cause in front of the king, is unwilling to leave the niceties of such dangerous discussions in the hands of interpreters. *Parrhesia*, freedom of speech is a peculiarly Greek, even Athenian, habit and it is ironic that Themistocles needs to learn Persian in order to engage in this very Greek activity (just as in Diodorus' account he needs to learn Persian in order to go to trial). Once he learns Persian, Themistocles is able to leave the interpreters behind. This allows him not only to conduct intimate conversations with the king, but also retain full control over the quantity and quality of his words. While the Persian autocrat may have invited the Greek to express frank and potentially unwelcome ideas freely, Themistocles is wise enough to know that such invitations are often regretted and can be cancelled at a moment's notice. Indeed, outspokenness in conversation with the king can lead to death.[35]

Themistocles compares translated speech, words that are conveyed by interpreters, to a rolled up tapestry. Interpreters compress one's words and consequently the patterns, the subtleties and intricacies of one's thought, are lost.[36] It is worth noting that this depiction of brief and simplified language would also apply to the speech of

[32] Ath. 2.48c. According to Phanias (*FGrH* 1012 F22 = fr. 28 Wehrli), Themistocles himself is given a city, Perkote, to supply his bedding; compare Thuc. 1.138.5.

[33] Plut. *Them*. 26.4. Such wagons were curtained off from the outside and probably soft and cushioned on the inside; see Ar. *Ach*. 68–70 and above n. 15. Plutarch tells us that Artaxerxes II strayed from custom and encouraged his wife to travel openly in her wagon, without curtains γυμνὴ τῶν παραπετασμάτων (Plut. *Artax*. 5.6; see too *Mor*. 173F and compare his description of the closely hung curtains in Themistocles' wagon).

[34] See Briant (n. 2), 205–6 (and 912), who cites Ath. 13.575f.; Philostr. *VA* 1.25 and *Alexander Romance* 3.28.10, but is sceptical about the accuracy of these reports. See too Ath. 5.197B for Persian carpets decorated with beautiful designs of woven figures (ψιλαὶ . . . Περσικαὶ . . . ἀκριβῆ τὴν εὐγραμμίαν τῶν ἐνυφασμένων ἔχουσαι ζῳδίων). The Budé (Paris, 1961) edition of Plut. *Them*. translates τοῖς ποικίλοις στρώμασιν in our passage (29.3) as 'tapis historiés', 'illustrated carpets'.

[35] See for instance the caution with which Demaratus responds to Xerxes' questions at Hdt. 7.101–2 and compare 8.65.

[36] Here brevity in speech is presented as a negative quality, a crippling limitation, but elsewhere Plutarch praises laconic speech, and compares compressed, effective speech to a valuable coin of small bulk. See Plut. *Phoc.* 5.2–3; *Lyc.* 19.1 and see L. Van der Stockt, 'Plutarch on language', in P. Swiggers and A. Wouters (edd.), *Le langage dans l'antiquité* (Leuven, 1990), 180–96, at 184–6.

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a person speaking a foreign language in which he or she was not completely fluent. But it is clear both from the context here and from a parallel passage elsewhere in Plutarch that the tapestry image is used of speech which is translated by interpreters, and not of the hesitant or broken speech of a foreigner.[37]

Three further passages dealing with textures and textiles are worth noting here. In a saying which Plutarch assigns to the Persian queen Parysatis (*Mor.* 174A), she advises that anyone who intends to speak to the king openly (μετὰ παρρησίας) should use words of linen (βυσσίνοις . . . ῥήμασιν), that is, soft words.[38] Here too we find an image drawn from textiles used in the context of a free and open discussion with the king, but while Themistocles points to the length, complexity and subtlety of a woven material, Parysatis stresses its softness. Indeed Persian textiles are often noted for their luxuriousness and smoothness (above p. 451 with n. 31). Once again it is tempting to use gender differences: Parysatis, who is normally far from a gentle person, favours the use of mildness, perhaps even deceptive and flattering softness, for frank discussions with the king, while the Greek hero stresses the need to weave words intricately and at length.

Themistocles' desire to unroll a tapestry, as it were, may also have reminded Plutarch's readers of the carpet scene in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* (908–56). Clytemnestra spreads out (πέδον . . . στορνύναι πετάσμασιν, 909; εἵμασι στρώσασ' . . . πόρον, 921) a rich, purple, decorated (ἐν ποικίλοις . . . κάλλεσιν, 923; τῶν ποικίλων, 926; ἐν ποικίλοις, 936) cloth. Agamemnon objects that he is not to be treated either as a woman or a barbarian, and he fears that treading on this costly fabric is likely to incur the envy of the gods. Nonetheless, he bends to Clytemnestra's will, after she points out, among other arguments, that Priam, the barbarian enemy king, would have accepted this textile tribute as his due. Themistocles presents himself to the king as someone who is willing to spread out elaborately wrought textiles and display them before the Persian king. While there is no suggestion that Themistocles will tread on these tapestries himself, he nonetheless seems to be trampling his Greek values and loyalties underfoot.

There is no doubt that the Persian king is well acquainted with luxurious carpets. In his *Persica*, Heracleides reports that the king walks on Sardian carpets, spread underfoot (ὑποτιθεμένων ψιλοταπίδων Σαρδιανῶν, fr. 1 = Ath. 12.514c), on which no one else may tread. When Themistocles states that he wishes to learn Persian in order to reveal his own intricate designs, he is perhaps hinting to the king that he will unroll carpets for the ruler to walk on by himself, that is, he will impart special secrets intended only for the king's ear. The absence of interpreters allows him to discuss Persian matters in private with the king and there is no danger that his words will be leaked to outsiders.[39]

Themistocles learns to speak Persian and consequently retains control of his words, but he does so at a price. He is singularly accessible to the king and such accessibility can be seen as a weakness. We find several tales of ancient leaders who

[37] The parallel is found in a collection of sayings attributed to Themistocles by Plutarch. Themistocles again compares speech to rich textiles and stresses that he wishes to learn Persian in order to converse with the king privately, without an intermediary (ὅπως . . . δι' ἑαυτοῦ καὶ μὴ δι' ἑτέρου ποιήσαιτο τὴν πρὸς αὐτὸν ἔντευξιν, *Mor.* 185E–F).

[38] I thank my student Eran Almagor for bringing this passage to my attention.

[39] A story which well illustrates the advantages of managing without an interpreter is found in Curtius Rufus (5.11.47). Patron, the commander of the Greeks in the army of Darius III, manages to speak to the king privately, without an interpreter, and thus ensure Darius' safety from a disloyal Persian. Here, however, it is the Persian king who knows some Greek.

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have become so great that they make themselves unavailable, deliberately surrounding themselves with interpreters even when speaking to their fellow countrymen. Curtius Rufus (6.11.4) tells us that Bolon, the proud captain of Alexander who was of humble Macedonian birth, did not blush at his men hearing his words through interpreters. Valerius Maximus reports that Hannibal, elated by his success at Cannae, spoke to his fellow citizens only through interpreters (9.5 ext. 3).[40] Themistocles is in the reverse position: he needs to overcome linguistic barriers in order to become the king's familiar and ingratiate himself.

There is, in fact, something demeaning about Themistocles having to take the trouble to learn Persian, the barbarian language of his former enemies. Indeed, an earlier story in Plutarch's *Themistocles* points to his sensitivity to the implications of using one language, rather than another, in delicate circumstances. Plutarch describes what he calls 'the bilingual affair' (τὸ περὶ τὸν δίγλωσσον ἔργον, 6.3), an incident which took place during the Persian Wars, when Themistocles was still a revered Athenian commander. Themistocles, Plutarch tells us, arranges for the execution of a Greek interpreter for daring to use the Greek language in the Persian cause. The interpreter has translated into Greek the Persian king's demands that the Greeks submit earth and water to him, and Themistocles objects strenuously to this use of Greek in order to transmit the commands of a barbarian. Commentators agree that this story of an executed translator is fictitious, based on a conflation of various reports by Herodotus on the fates of messengers from the Persian king (none of whom are specifically said to be interpreters),[41] but the tale is nonetheless illuminating for the underlying attitude it reveals. Not only is learning Persian an indication of disloyalty to the Greek cause, but the very use of Greek in order to convey Persian dictates can lead to charges of perfidy. Even straightforward interpretation can be hazardous for a Greek and acting as a medium by which a foreigner can be heard in Greek is considered a serious provocation. We find in Xenophon's *Anabasis*, for instance, two such go-betweens, Phalinus and Heracleides, both of whom are accused of betraying the Greek cause to the barbarians. Phalinus, bilingual in Greek and Persian, serves as a spokesman for a delegation from the Persian king, conveying Artaxerxes' request that the Greeks surrender their arms (*An*. 2.1.7–23). Heracleides intercedes between the Thracians and the Greeks, but earns the anger and contempt of Xenophon for doing so. He, like Phalinus, is pointedly reminded of his Greek origins, and is described by Xenophon's spokesman as someone who harms his fellow Greeks (7.6.41). It seems as if bilingual Greeks are treacherous Greeks virtually by definition: language differences must remain in place.[42]

At first sight, then, it seems quite ironic that Themistocles, the guardian of the sanctity of the Greek tongue, will subsequently put considerable effort into learning

[40] See Gehman (n. 23), 21 and compare the behaviour of Herodotus' Deioces, who sets up a series of barriers to distance himself from his fellow Medes (Hdt. 1.96–100).

[41] Aelius Aristides elaborates the tale and praises Themistocles for killing the interpreter who dared to use his voice for the Persians and against the Greeks; such proposals are better left untranslated (3 [*For the four*]. 229–30); cf. 1 [*Panathen.*]. 99 with scholia. See Frost (n. 8), 95–6 and 218; Dubuisson (n. 7), 210–11; Mayer (n. 10), 299–300.

[42] Herodotus tells of a series of bi-lingual figures (not all of whom are Greek) who come to an unhappy end—see Hdt. 1.73, 6.138, 4.78. A much later writer, Justin (20.5.12–13), presents the dangers of bi-lingualism from the Carthaginian perspective. He tells of a Carthaginian traitor who corresponded with Dionysius of Syracuse. The Carthaginians then decreed that no one should study Greek language or literature, to ensure that none would be able to speak with the enemy or write to him unaided.

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Persian. But perhaps Plutarch's Themistocles is being consistent. He goes over to Persia with the intention of betraying Greece and helping the Persian king conquer his country, or so he implies with his promise of many more men who will perform *proskynesis* to the king (above, p. 451). When betraying Greece, Themistocles will use the Persian tongue: learning Persian means that he will not have to use Greek in order to further his treachery. He will fawn, plot and deceive in Persian and consequently will avoid degrading his native language. In this manner Plutarch's Themistocles remains loyal to his native tongue, if not to his native country. Plutarch also tells us that Themistocles uses Persian when encouraging the king to introduce changes in his court; here, too, he does not sully the Greek language, but uses a barbarian language to deal with barbarian affairs. Is Themistocles using his Persian language skills against the Greeks or for the Persians?[43]

It is also possible that Themistocles made use of his Persian when learning Magian lore. Plutarch is our only source to mention Themistocles' acquisition of Magian learning, acquired at the king's bidding (*Them*. 29.6). This is one of a series of special honours accorded to Themistocles, along with joining the king on his hunts and becoming acquainted with the king's mother. Presumably knowing Persian would make this instruction in Magian knowledge easier.

Let us look at one last passage which deals with Themistocles' use of Persian speech, a passage from Philostratus' *Imagines*. In this work, dating to the third century C.E., Philostratus describes a series of paintings. Scholarly debate rages hot and heavy as to whether Philostratus is describing actual paintings or imaginary ones; the question cannot be resolved here.[44] The *Imagines* includes a lengthy description of a painting of Themistocles addressing Persians in their own language in Babylon. Philostratus describes Themistocles as a Greek among barbarians, a true man among ruined and dissolute figures (*Ἕλλην ἐν βαρβάροις, ἀνὴρ ἐν οὐκ ἀνδράσιν ἅτε ἀπολωλόσι καὶ τρυφῶσιν*, 2.31.1). Themistocles wears a simple philosopher's cloak, while the Persians are as resplendent as peacocks in their rich, embroidered attire, and Philostratus thinks that Themistocles is trying to convince the Persians to change their luxurious ways.[45] The painting makes it clear that the Greek is not put off by his rich surroundings and feels as much at home as if he were addressing the Athenian assembly, Philostratus states. He then manages to deduce even the language spoken by Themistocles from the details of the picture:

καὶ ἡ φωνὴ οὐκ ἀπὸ τοῦ ἡμεδαποῦ τρόπου· μηδίζων ὁ Θεμιστοκλῆς· ἐξεπόνησε γὰρ ἐκεῖ τοῦτο. εἰ δ' ἀπιστεῖς, ὅρα τοὺς ἀκούοντας, ὡς τὸ εὐξύνετον ἐπισημαίνουσι τοῖς ὄμμασιν, ὅρα καὶ τὸν Θεμιστοκλέα τὴν μὲν τοῦ προσώπου στάσιν παραπλήσιον τοῖς λέγουσι, πεπλανημένον δὲ τὴν τῶν ὀφθαλμῶν ἔννοιαν ὑπὸ τοῦ λέγειν, ὡς μετέμαθεν.

His speech is not our own language and Themistocles is using Median [i.e. Persian], for he took the trouble to acquire it there. If you doubt this, look at his listeners; their eyes make it plain that they well understand him. Look too at Themistocles: he holds his head in the manner of speakers, but one can tell that he is speaking a newly learned language from the wandering of his eyes. (*Imag.* 2.31.2)

[43] The orator Themistius (6 [*Philadelphoi*]. 71C–D) has little doubt that Themistocles spent a year learning Persian in order to convey his nefarious plans (cf. *οὐ χρηστὰ νοῶν*) in secret to the king, without an interpreter as a witness. Cf. Mayer (n. 10), 302.

[44] G. Anderson, *Philostratus: Biography and Belles Lettres in the Third Century A.D.* (London, 1986), 260 and 277–8, n. 4 has a survey of bibliography on the 'painting vs. literature' question. He repeatedly points out (259–68) the futility of trying to decide the issue.

[45] Anderson (n. 44), 264, sees the situation as a variation on the theme of 'the hero among women' and compares Heracles at Omphale's court and Achilles among the women.

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Themistocles, dressed as a Greek, and speaking as boldly as if he were in Athens, nonetheless uses the Persian language. His words are not specified, but the listeners' understanding of them can be read from their eyes, while Themistocles holds his head in a speaker's posture. Only his expression betrays the effort needed to speak a recently acquired language. This visual representation—whether real or imaginary—of a person speaking a foreign language, with both his own expression and those of his audience indicating the extent of their comprehension and fluency is fascinating.[46] Equally interesting is the use to which Themistocles puts his newly acquired Persian, according to Philostratus. Themistocles looks, feels, and thinks like an Athenian, and his aim in speaking Persian is completely unselfish. He wishes to bring Greek values to the Persians and he uses their language in order to educate and improve them. Clearly Philostratus' role here as interpreter, in addition to (alleged) reporter, is crucial. Even if there were such a picture as Philostratus describes, there is no way that he could determine the topic of Themistocles' speech simply by looking at the painting; the Greek leader could have easily been pleading for his life or discussing political matters, rather than pontificating on moral values. Indeed, Philostratus prefaces his statement that Themistocles is trying to persuade the Persians to rid themeselves of luxury with the word *οἶμαι* 'I think' (32.1; cf. 32.2 where again using *οἶμαι* he suggests that Themistocles is telling the king of the good he has done Xerxes). Philostratus has transformed Themistocles into a man with a cultural and moral mission. Here, nearly 700 years after Thucydides' original account, we find for the first time that Themistocles acquires and uses Persian speech for cultural and ethical purposes, in an attempt to convey his own superior Greek values to the inferior Persians.[47]

In conclusion, it is interesting to see how each of our sources adapts and transforms Thucydides' original account, embellishing and elaborating various elements of the story for their own purposes. Thus Themistocles goes from speaking Persian as best he could, to achieving a fluent and elegant style in that tongue, outdoing even native speakers in eloquence and argumentation. Themistocles also becomes acquainted with Persian writing, literature and religion. Generally it takes him a year to learn Persian, sometimes by dint of hard work and perseverance and the sheer memorization of a huge number of words, but he is also said to have picked up the language virtually by chance, with no effort on his part. In some accounts, Themistocles learns Persian before arriving at the court, but in others, special circumstances—he is on trial for his life or is called upon to voice his real thoughts to the king—cause him to study the language. At times Themistocles is portrayed as a traitor to the Greek cause, and at times he only pretends to betray the Greeks. Defecting to Persia and acquiring Persians ways can lead to a loss of dignity: we have seen Themistocles hidden away in a wagon, disguised as one of the king's mistresses, and agreeing to bow down to the Great King. Themistocles did not have a happy end and he is said by some to have

[46] In another painting, that of the Persian warrior queen Rhodogyne pouring a libation and praying after her victory over the Armenians, Philostratus manages to 'see' that her soft, attractive lips are on the verge of speaking Greek (*τάχα ἑλληνιεῖ*, *Imag*. 2.5.5)

[47] See Mayer (n. 10), 303 who thinks that Plutarch already presents Themistocles as an emissary of Greek culture. The *Life of Apollonius* (1.25ff.) has a variation on the *Imagines* scene. Apollonius visits the king of Babylon, whose palace is adorned with silver and gold tapestries depicting Greek myths and events from the Persian wars (1.25.2). The king has just dreamed that he had taken on the appearance of Artaxerxes and so is delighted to hear that a 'Themistocles' had come to his court. In this account it is the king who speaks perfect Greek (1.32.1) and Apollonius is seemingly anxious to learn wisdom from him.

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committed suicide; others have him die of illness.[48] Yet, in none of these ancient accounts, is his mastery of Persian presented as anything other than an admirable and useful accomplishment. Indeed, learning another language can be as desirable and enriching as acquiring a finely woven, richly embellished Persian carpet.

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[48] See, e.g. Thuc. 1.138.4; Diod. 11.58.2–3.

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