

Abstract

The death of Masistios and the mourning for his loss (Hdt. 9.20-25)

Professor Angeliki PETROPOULOU

Hellenic Open University, Patras, Greece

The description of the death of Masistios as told by Herodotus at 9.20 ff. is the only substantial account of the death and mourning for a Persian during the Persian wars (490-479 BC). Masistios, whom the Greeks called Makistios, was the Persian cavalry commander who met his death during the skirmishes preceding the battle of Plataiai. Thrown by his gold-bridled horse of Nisaeon breed, which was shot by an Athenian arrow, he was slain after a hard fight. The Persians were unable to recover his body, which the Greeks regarded as something worthy of viewing, given the dead man's stature and beauty. They placed it on a cart and paraded it through their ranks. The Persians, on the other hand, mourned Masistios for several days in an unprecedented fashion. Their lamentation echoed throughout Boeotia, and they cut short their own hair and the manes of their horses and pack animals.

This communication presents evidence indicating that: 1) though the death of Masistios is presented from an Athenian viewpoint, there is a Herodotean emphasis on Masistios' heroic features, i.e. the fact that he was a daring horseman, who was killed only with great difficulty, when forced to fight alone on foot, a man worth viewing even as a corpse because of his stature and beauty, his Greek name "Makistios" being actually related to his height, 2) Masistios is portrayed as a reputable Persian officer, held in great esteem by both the Persians and their king, who had rewarded him for his services and probably for his upright character with the gold-bridled horse of Nisaeon breed on which he rode, his Persian name "Masistios" being suggestive of the uprightness of his character. Each of these two ways in which Masistios is presented is enough to justify the unprecedented mourning of the Persian army and Mardonius himself. These heroic features and the profuse lamentation, the cutting of the horses' manes and the considerable length of mourning have parallels in the epic or historical traditions of both the Greeks and the Persians. The cutting of the horses' manes in particular seems to be a custom peculiar to mounted warriors, both among the Persians and among the Thessalians and the Macedonians, i.e. the countries, where the horse played a pre-eminent role in warfare from time immemorial.