

# XERXES



MAKERS OF HISTORY SERIES

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## THE MOTHER OF XERXES.



THE name of Xerxes is associated with the highest possible degree of grandeur. This monarch ruled the ancient Persian Empire when it was at its most prosperous and powerful. However, everything we know of Xerxes we have learned from the Greek historians, and since the Greeks defeated Xerxes in war, it is likely that they exaggerated his greatness in order to make their own deed seem more impressive.

The mother of Xerxes was Atossa, a daughter of Cyrus the Great, the founder of the Persian Empire. Cyrus was killed in Scythia, a wild region north of the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea. His son Cambyses succeeded him.

In ancient days, a kingdom or empire was treated like the private property of the ruler, existing solely for his personal enjoyment. A king or emperor could have more palaces, money, and wives than other men, and if he was ambitious, he could march into his neighbors' lands and

take theirs, while satisfying his love of adventure and gaining great renown in battle.

Divine Providence, however, brings good out of evil and uses the ambition of princes as a way of keeping order and government among men. These great ancient rulers, for example, would not have been able to collect their taxes or enlist their soldiers or gather supplies for their wars without a system of social organization to keep everything running smoothly. Thus, absolute monarchs, however selfish and ambitious, have a strong personal interest in establishing order and justice throughout all their lands. In fact, the greater their selfishness and ambition, the greater will this need for order be, for the greater the nation's order, the greater the revenue that it will provide, and the greater the armies that can be raised from it.

Therefore, it is a mistake to believe that the great heroes and conquerors of history have brought nothing but strife and chaos. It is true that these things have often followed them but these are the exceptions, not the rule. A conqueror's deeds of destruction attract more attention than their quiet, patient labors to extend the general social organization of their state. We could more accurately describe Caesar's life by saying he organized Europe than by saying he conquered it. His bridges, roads, judicial systems, coinage, and calendar left a far greater mark on mankind than his battles did. Darius was, in the same way, the organizer of Asia. William the Conqueror advanced the social organization of England. Napoleon's true memorial is not the bronze column in the Place Vendome, formed from captured cannon, but the social institutions, systems, and codes which he perfected.

These considerations, however, do not make the great sovereigns any worse or any better from a moral point of

view. Everything they did, whether organization or conquest, was done out of selfish ambition. They arranged the state to form a more solid foundation for their power. They maintained order among their people, just as a master keeps his slaves from fighting so that they work harder. They established legal rights and courts to enforce them; they opened roads; they built bridges; they encouraged commerce; they hung robbers and pirates—all so that the collection of their money and the enlistment of their armies might go unhindered. Some rulers may have acted with nobler sentiments, feeling either pride in their prosperous empire or, like Alfred, a genuine interest in the welfare of their fellow men. Still, selfish ambition and glory have nearly always been these conquerors' main motivations, and it is only divine wisdom which has turned them into means of preserving peace and order instead of destroying it.

But to return to Atossa. Her father Cyrus, who established the great Persian empire, was relatively just for a conqueror and desired the welfare and happiness of his millions of subjects. However, his son Cambyses, Atossa's brother, having grown up expecting to inherit great wealth and power and having been neglected by his father as a child, became a reckless, proud, and selfish young man without any sense of self-control. Though he rose to the throne when his father was killed in battle, his reign was short, desperate, and tragic, and he remains one of the most savage monsters that has ever lived.

It was the custom in those days for the Persian monarchs to have many wives, and when a monarch died, his successor would inherit his predecessor's family as well as his throne. Cyrus had several children by his various wives. Cambyses and Smerdis were the only sons, but there were several daughters, among whom Atossa was the most

distinguished. The ladies of the court lived in different palaces so that they were isolated from each other. When Cambyses came to the throne, he fell in love with one of his father's daughters and wished to make her one of his wives. He was accustomed to indulge every whim and passion, but even he seems to have had some concerns about such an action as this. He consulted the Persian judges. They discussed the matter and then replied that although they found no law allowing a man to marry his sister, they found many laws allowing a Persian king to do whatever he thought best.

Cambyses therefore added the princess to his wives, and not long afterward he married another of his half-sisters in the same way. One of these princesses was Atossa.

Cambyses invaded Egypt, and in the course of his mad exploits in that country he killed his brother Smerdis and one of his sisters, and was eventually killed himself. Atossa escaped the dangers of this stormy and terrible reign and returned safely to the Persian capital, Susa, after Cambyses' death.

Smerdis, the brother of Cambyses, would have succeeded him if he had not been secretly assassinated on Cambyses' orders. There was another Smerdis in Susa, a magian (a sort of priest) who Cambyses had made regent while he was away. Smerdis planned to usurp the throne as if he was Smerdis the prince, with many cunning schemes to hide his deception. Among his other plans, one was to keep himself concealed from all who had known Smerdis the prince, only allowing into his presence a few who had not personally known Cambyses' brother. Such seclusion was not unusual after the death of a king, and Smerdis the magian was able to rule undetected for several months, living both in greatest luxury and absolute seclusion and fear.

One of the main reasons for his solitude was his ears. Some years before, while still in some obscure position, he had offended his sovereign and was punished by having his ears cut off. He therefore had to carefully conceal this mutilation with his hair and headdress, and even then he never felt quite safe.

At last one of the nobles in the court, a wise and observant man, suspected the impostor. He had no access to Smerdis himself, but his daughter Phaedyra was one of Smerdis' wives. The nobleman was forbidden from contact with his daughter, but he managed to send word to her, asking whether her husband was the true Smerdis or not. She replied that she did not know, because she had never seen any other Smerdis. The nobleman then attempted to communicate with Atossa, but found it impossible to do so. Atossa had of course known her brother well, and therefore the magian kept her very isolated. As a last resort, the nobleman told his daughter to find an opportunity to feel for her husband's ears. Phaedyra was at first afraid to attempt something so dangerous, but one night when he was asleep she put her hand under his turban and found that his ears were gone.

A conspiracy was formed to dethrone and destroy the usurper. The plot was successful, Smerdis was killed, his imprisoned queens were set free, and Darius was placed on the throne. Atossa now became the wife of Darius and figured prominently in the history of his long and splendid reign.

Her name comes up in connection with an expedition Darius sent to explore Greece and Italy. She was sick, and after suffering in silence as long as possible, she determined to consult a Greek physician who had been brought to Persia as a captive and had gained great honor in Susa for his



medical skill. The physician said he would cure her if she promised to grant him one request once she was well. She agreed, and the physician took on her case. In due time she was cured, and the physician told her that his request was for her to persuade Darius to send him home to Greece.

Atossa was faithful in fulfilling her promise. When she was alone with Darius, she reminded him of the great military power at his command and suggested that he begin a plan of foreign conquest. She also praised his genius and energy, trying to inspire in him a desire to perform great deeds in the view of mankind.

Darius listened to Atossa with interest and pleasure. He said that he had been forming such plans himself. He was going to build a bridge across the Hellespont to unite Europe and Asia, and he was also going to invade the country of the Scythians, where Cyrus had fallen in battle. It would be a great glory for him, he said, to succeed in conquest where Cyrus had failed.

But these plans did not fit Atossa's purpose. She urged her husband to postpone his invasion of the Scythians and first to conquer the Greeks. The Scythians, she said, were savages, and their country not worth the cost of conquering it, while Greece would make a noble prize. She also said that she had been wanting some slaves from Greece for a long time—some of the women of Sparta, Corinth, and Athens, of whose grace and skill she had heard so much.

It was pleasing to Darius' military vanity to be thus asked to invade another continent and undertake the conquest of the mightiest nation on earth for the purpose of getting accomplished waiting-maids for his queen. He became restless and excited while listening to Atossa's proposal, and it was obvious that he was very strongly inclined to agree to them. He finally decided to send an expedition

into Greece to explore the country and bring back a report. He decided to make the Greek physician the leader of the expedition, and thus Atossa achieved her goal.

A full account of this expedition and of the various adventures they had is given in our history of Darius. We should mention, however, that while the expedition returned, the physician did not. His plan succeeded, and he escaped while in Greece.

Atossa had four sons. Xerxes was the eldest of them, though he was not the eldest son of Darius, who had older sons from another wife whom he had married before he took the throne. The oldest of these was Artobazanes, a virtuous and amiable prince who was not particularly ambitious, although, as the eldest son of his father, he claimed to be Darius' heir. Atossa disagreed and maintained that the oldest of her children was the heir to the throne.

It became necessary to decide this question before Darius' death, for Darius was planning on marching with his army into Greece, and Persian law required him to determine the succession before doing so.

There immediately arose a dispute between the allies of Artobazanes and Xerxes, each side eagerly supporting the claim of its own candidate. The mother and friends of Artobazanes maintained that he was the oldest son and therefore the heir. Atossa, on the other hand, argued that Xerxes was the grandson of Cyrus, and therefore had the highest possible hereditary right to the Persian throne.

This was true, for while Darius was originally a noble of high rank, he was not of the royal line and had only been made the successor because there had been no heir of the royal family to take the throne. It could therefore be reasonably claimed that Darius' governing had been a regency rather than a reign and that Xerxes, being the old-

est son of Cyrus' daughter, was the true representative of the royal line. It might not be wise to disturb Darius' government during his lifetime, but at his death, Xerxes was unquestionably entitled to the throne.

As reasonable as this argument was, Darius was not inclined to accept it. It declared Xerxes the heir to the throne because he was Atossa's son, not because he was Darius' son, and therefore seemed to deny any legitimate claim to the throne that Darius might have.

While things were thus in turmoil, a Greek named Demaratus arrived at Susa. He was a dethroned prince from Sparta and had fled his own country to seek refuge in Darius' capital. Demaratus found a way to reconcile Darius' pride as a king with his personal preference as a husband and father. He told the king that, according to the laws in Greece, Xerxes was his heir, for he was the oldest son born after Darius took the throne. According to Greek principles, a son was only entitled to such rank as his father held when the son was born, and none of his children born before he took the throne had any claim to the Persian throne. Artobazanes, therefore, was to be considered the son of Darius the noble, while Xerxes was the son of Darius the king.

In the end, Darius took this view and designated Xerxes as his successor in case he should not return from his distant expedition. He did not return. He did not even live to set out upon it, and the question of the succession arose again after his death. The way in which it was finally settled will be described in the next chapter.



## EGYPT AND GREECE.



**E**VEN though Darius made Xerxes his heir before his death, the argument over the succession arose again when his death actually occurred. Xerxes was there at the time and at once took on the roles of king. Xerxes sent a message to Artobazanes informing him of their father's death and of his own intention of taking the throne. He also said that he would make his brother his second-in-command and sent him many splendid presents to gain his friendship and support.

Artobazanes sent back word to Xerxes. He thanked him for the presents, but said that he considered himself just as entitled to the throne as Xerxes was. In the event that he became king, he promised to treat all of his brothers, especially Xerxes, with the utmost consideration and respect.

Soon after this, Artobazanes came to Media, where Xerxes was, and the question of who should be king was