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## Cuprins/ Contents

Liviu IANCU – Hdt. 9.80: another beetle in the rose?.....	5-10
Diana PAVEL – Reflections on miniaturisation. The case of the Tomb of the Five Chairs from the Banditaccia necropolis at Caere.....	11-30
Cosmin-Mihai VASILE – Sending a message - References to the military and Golden Age in the coinage of Carausius.....	31-62
Ana-Maria BALȚĂ – Roman Provincial Coinage – a mirror of the urban landscape. The case of Nikopolis ad Istrum .....	63-80
Adriana PANAITE – Preliminary Observations on Roman Landscape in <i>Moesia Inferior</i> ..	81-101
Florica (BOHÎLȚEA) MIHUȚ – Romanian ethnographic interpretations from the 20th century regarding women representations on Trajan’s Column and the <i>Tropaeum Traiani</i> .....	102-116
Valentin-Victor BOTTEZ – A New Milestone from the Reign of Maximinus Thrax, discovered at Istros (Romania).....	117-119
Andra JUGĂNARU – Monastic Landscape in Early Christianity – Case Studies from the Fourth Century.....	120-131

## Recenzii și prezentări de carte/ Reviews and Books Presentations

Cat Jarman, <i>The Bone Chests: Unlocking the Secrets of the Anglo-Saxons</i> , 2023, London, William Collins Publishers, 272p., ISBN-10: 0008447322, ISBN-13: 978-0008447328 – Vlad Ioan BÎNDEA.....	132-135
Graham Harman, Christopher Witmore, <i>Objects Untimely. Object-Oriented Philosophy and Archaeology</i> , Cambridge, Hoboken, Ed. Polity Press, 2023, 225 p., ISBN: 978-1-5095-5656-4 – Vlad-Ioan CIUR.....	136-138
Melanie M. Beasley, Andrew D. Somerville (eds.), <i>Exploring Human Behavior Through Isotope Analysis. Applications in Archaeological Research</i> , Springer, 2023, 303 p., ISBN: 978-3-031-32266-2, ISBNe: 978-3-031-32268-6 – Petra-Ioana COMAN.....	139-141
Irene Vallejo, <i>Papyrus. The Invention of Books in the Ancient World</i> , trad. Charlotte Whittle, Great Britain: Hodder and Stoughton, 2023, 464 p., ISBN: 9781529344004 – Andreea CONSTANTIN.....	142-144

Csaba Szabó, <i>Roman Religion in the Danubian Provinces. Space sacralization and religious communication during the Principate (1st-3rd century AD)</i> , 2022, Oxford, Oxbow Books Publishing, 312 p., ISBN 1789257840, 9781789257847 – Sebastian Valeriu DUMITRESCU.....	145-148
Colin Webster, <i>Tools and the Organism: Technology and the Body in Ancient Greek and Roman Medicine</i> , Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2023, 320 p., ISBN: 978-0-226-82877-0, ISBNe: 978-0-226-82878-7 – Andrei-David IONESCU.....	149-153
Toby Wilkinson, <i>Ramesses the Great: Egypt's King of Kings</i> , New Haven (CU)-Londra, Yale University Press, 2023, 240 p., ISBN 978-0-300-25665-9 – Mihail Walter TEUTSCH...154-157	
Marechal Sadi, <i>Bathing at the Edge of the Empire. Roman Baths and Bathing Habits in the North-Western Corner of Continental Europe</i> , The Archeology of Northern Europe (vol. 2), Turnout, Belgium, Brepols Publishers, 2023., 304 p., ISBN: 978-2-503-60066-6, eISBN: 978-2-503-60067-3 – Cătălin UDEANU.....	158-161
Cronica activității CICSĂ, anul 2024 – Florica (Bohîlțea) Mihaș.....	162

## Hdt. 9.80: another beetle in the rose?

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**Abstract:** The information provided by Herodotos that the Greeks did not collect as booty the costly garments of the fallen Persians after the battle at Plataia in 479 BC, as there were plenty of other precious objects that they plundered (Hdt. 9.80), is contradicted by contextual data for an apophthegm attributed to Pausanias by Plutarch (*Apoph. Lac.* 230e). It is shown that the version preserved by Plutarch is more reliable and that Herodotos slightly altered the facts in his account, using a literary device to emphasize the power and wealth of the Persian army routed at Plataia. The alteration of the facts also made an Athenian slander against the Aiginetans seem more credible.

**Keywords:** booty, Herodotos, Plataia, Plutarch, textiles, warfare

Narrating the aftermath of the great Greek victory over the Persians at Plataia in 478 BC, Herodotos (9.80) wrote:

[1] ... Then Pausanias made a proclamation that no man should touch the spoils, and ordered the helots to gather all the stuff together. They, spreading all over the camp, found there tents adorned with gold and silver, and couches gilded and silver-plated, and golden bowls and cups and other drinking-vessels; [2] and sacks they found on wagons, in which were seen cauldrons of gold and silver. They stripped from the dead who lay there their armlets and torques, and golden daggers; as for the pattern-weaved clothing, it was disregarded (ἐπεὶ ἐσθῆτός γε ποικίλης λόγος ἐγίνετο οὐδεὶς). [3] Much of all this the helots showed, as much as they could not conceal, but much they stole and sold to the Aiginetans. As a result the Aiginetans laid the foundation of their great fortunes by buying gold from the helots as though it were bronze. (transl. A.D. Godley with minor revisions by the author)

The meaning of this passage is obvious. The booty was so abundant that the Greeks were forced to collect and keep only the most valuable items that they found in the tents and wagons of the Persian camp, as well as on the corpses of the fallen enemy, discarding other

precious objects that were not that expensive compared with the former. The first category of items is illustrated by various gold and silver objects, whereas the items in the second group are represented solely by the pattern-weaved garments.

However, a saying attributed to the general commander of the Greeks at Plataia, the Spartan regent Pausanias, included by Plutarch in his anthology of *Apophthegmata Lakonika* (230e), incidentally shows that the nicely-worked and richly-adorned clothes of the Persians were actually taken as spoils by the Greeks following the battle, in direct contradiction to the Herodotean account<sup>1</sup>:

When some people were amazed at the costliness of the raiment found among the spoils of the barbarians (ἐν τοῖς λαφύροις τῶν βαρβάρων τὴν πολυτέλειαν τῆς ἐσθῆτος), he said that it would have been better for them to be themselves men of worth than to possess things of worth. (transl. Frank Cole Babbitt)

The historicity of the information is hard to assess, as for many other sayings attributed by Plutarch to Spartan leaders of old time.

Firstly, it should be pointed out that the two sources cannot be reconciled by making the latter refer to another military event. Given the short-lived regency of Pausanias (late 480-478 BC) and the place of the saying among the other six apophthegms ascribed to him, right before the only one explicitly placed in the aftermath of the battle of Plataia of August 479 BC (that reproduces an anecdote also found in Hdt. 9.82), it is unreasonable to hypothesize that the source followed by Plutarch was referring to any other battle than the great clash at Plataia<sup>2</sup>.

Whether Pausanias genuinely uttered the words ascribed to him on this occasion is more difficult to tell. On the one hand, they illustrate the philosophical *topos* that the only real and desirable wealth is represented not by material objects, but by moral virtue<sup>3</sup>. On the other hand, unlike many obviously spurious apophthegms, attributed by different authors or by

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<sup>1</sup> There are no references to this issue in other accounts of the battle of Plataia, such as Plut. *Vit. Arist.* 11-21 and Diod. Sic. 29-33.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Fuhrmann 1988, 336, n. 2 on page 215. The attempt to reconcile the two accounts by placing Pausanias's saying after the preliminary engagement of the Megarians and Athenians against the Persian cavalry led by Masistios, whose body covered by a golden cuirass and a purple tunic was captured and paraded in front of the amazed Greek army (Hdt. 9.20-5) would be misguided for several reasons: the amazement was caused by Masistios's physical greatness and beauty, his behaviour was valiant and worthy of praise, the tightly-fought skirmish was not decisive and thus not an appropriate context for such a saying.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Pl. *Leg.* 870b; Cic. *Parad.* 6 (42-52).

Plutarch himself to various historical characters, this saying is not found anywhere else and is not credited to anybody else<sup>4</sup>.

The saying exhibits the same ethos as the abovementioned following apophthegm in the anthology, reproduced as well by Herodotos, where Pausanias compares the sumptuous banquet which he found prepared for the Persians with the modest barley-cakes eaten by the Greeks captains and soldiers alike<sup>5</sup>. Certainly, Herodotos introduces the anecdote in his narrative by the word λέγεται, thus expressing prudence, if not outright reluctance, and against it also speaks Pausanias's ease of adopting a luxurious Persian way of life a few years later, in Byzantion<sup>6</sup>. Moreover, the contrast between the rich feast of the side attempting conquest in a conflict and the austere meal of the defending side became a literary *topos* in later times, employed to embellish various historical events<sup>7</sup>, but as the case at Plataia is chronologically the first and also reported shortly after its completion, this later development should not be considered a compelling argument against its historicity.

Anyway, it is more important to highlight, based on the proximity of the two apophthegms and their similar focus on the contrast between Persian luxury and Greek simplicity, that whatever source Plutarch had for the saying mentioning the looted garments, it should not be regarded as inferior to the account of Herodotos. Both Herodotos and the source of Plutarch relied either on some authentic information (in case we accept the historicity of the sayings) or on the expected corpus of war tales that commonly emerge after major military engagements (in case we find them both to be slightly later inventions).

That Plutarch had access to good alternative sources for the Persian wars is indisputable, considering his *De Herodoti malignitate*, where he specifically mentions and even quotes some of them: the well-known historians Hellanikos and Ephoros (869a), but also Charon of Lampsakos (859b, 861c-d), Lysanias of Mallos (861c), Aristophanes the Boiotian and Nikandros of Kolophon (866f-867a), as well as the poets Simonides (869c, 871b, 872d-e) and Pindar (867c).

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<sup>4</sup> The only slight similarity is provided by a situation that occurred in 395 BC during Agesilaos's war against the Persians in Western Asia Minor: "And once when, by his orders, his prisoners of war were stripped of their clothing and offered for sale by the vendors of booty, their clothing found many purchasers, but their naked bodies, which were utterly white and delicate, owing to their effeminate habits, were ridiculed as useless and worthless." (Plut. *Vit. Ages.* 9.5, transl. by Bernadotte Perrin). I find implausible though the scenario that the apophthegm attributed to Pausanias evolved in a 4<sup>th</sup> century BC context under the influence of the deeds of Agesilaos.

<sup>5</sup> On apophthegms recorded by Plutarch which he derived from Herodotos, see Hershbell 1993, 147.

<sup>6</sup> Thuc. 1.130.1. See also How and Wells 1928, 324; Flower and Marincola 2002, 251.

<sup>7</sup> E.g. Diod. Sic. 21.12.4-6.

Consequently, I find myself inclined to assume that even if the saying itself might not be wholly historical, its contextual data about the plundering of clothing might well be. The Greeks usually despoiled their fallen enemies, including their garments, in case they were valuable<sup>8</sup>. Additionally, clothes are mentioned among the items taken as booty from the dead or captured Persians on several other occasions when the spoils of war were almost as rich or possibly even richer than at Plataia: in 490 BC, at Marathon<sup>9</sup>, in 478 BC, after the fall of Sestos and Byzantion<sup>10</sup>, in 466 BC, during the battle of the Eurymedon<sup>11</sup>, in 395 BC, during Agesilaos's campaign in Western Asia Minor<sup>12</sup>, during Alexander's conquest of the Achaemenid empire<sup>13</sup>. There is even a particular case in the early stages of the battle of Plataia, reported by Herodotus, in which such a precious garment is actually captured by the Hellenic army: the purple robe of the Persian commander Masistios, taken together with his cuirass of golden scales and his body and displayed on a cart in front of the ranks<sup>14</sup>.

Furthermore, there were no tactical or strategic reasons for the Greeks to conduct only a limited looting of the Persian camp and fallen soldiers. Whereas there was still a certain threat from the surviving Persians and the medizing Greeks, it was not that serious, as demonstrated by the fact that the Hellenic allied army advanced against Thebes from the battlefield only "on the eleventh day after the battle"<sup>15</sup>.

It seems then that Herodotos cannot be right in his statement that the precious garments of the Persians were disregarded when the booty was collected from the battlefield and the barbarian camp at Plataia. Herodotos's treatment of this particular matter appears to favour art over historical truth, a trait of his writing which was occasionally denounced in antiquity by Plutarch and various other scholars who even likened the Hallikarnassian historian to Homer and the poets<sup>16</sup>. Desirous of magnifying the wealth and the might of the Persians, as well as the number of their casualties, and thus to bring praise to the Greeks and their accomplishment at Plataia, Herodotos was able to achieve his goal through a relatively minor distortion of facts.

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<sup>8</sup> Iancu forthcoming.

<sup>9</sup> Plut. *Vit. Arist.* 5.5.

<sup>10</sup> Plut. *Vit. Cim.* 9.3.

<sup>11</sup> Diod. Sic. 11.61.1-2, but not confirmed by Thuc. 1.100 and Plut. *Vit. Cim.* 12-3.

<sup>12</sup> Plut. *Vit. Ages.* 9.5, Polyainos 2.1.6.

<sup>13</sup> It is worth mentioning here mainly the thorough depredation of Persepolis: despite the much more wealth that was found in the capital of the Persian Empire than on the battlefield of Plataia, the Macedonians and the Greeks did not disregard at all the costly raiment (Diod. Sic. 17.20.2-3).

<sup>14</sup> Hdt. 9.22.2, 25.1.

<sup>15</sup> Hdt. 9.86.2, with Hignett 1963, 342.

<sup>16</sup> Hershbell 1993, 151-8.



Additionally, this statement strengthened the credibility of his following claim that the Aiginetans made great fortunes by buying booty stolen by the helots at derisory prices: the greater the overall amount of available spoils, the more credible the malicious slander certainly spread by the Athenians due to their long-lasting enmity towards the Aiginetans that peaked at the time when the *Histories* were written<sup>17</sup>. Plutarch, though praising Herodotos's literary style, noted that it was exactly this craft of his as a writer that enabled him to unabatedly insert here and there such calumnies against the enemies of his Athenian patrons and skilfully compared such occurrences with poisonous beetles lurking beneath the beautiful external appearance of roses<sup>18</sup>. It is also telling that the previous passage, narrating the proposal of Lampon of Aigina to impale Mardonios, similarly contains both defamation of the Aiginetans and full acclaim for the Greek success at Plataia<sup>19</sup>.

On the other hand, it is curious that the Persian garments and nothing else are singled out both in Plutarch and Herodotos, although from opposed points of view. If Pausanias genuinely uttered the remark attributed to him by Plutarch when confronted with the amazement of his troops at the captured Persian clothing, could this be a trace of certain events – unfortunately impossible to reconstitute anymore – that occurred in connection with the garments during the collection of booty (e.g. quarrels about the shares in booty<sup>20</sup>, followed by potentially limited interdictions)? In this case, Herodotos, even though still following his penchant for dramatizing the historical account<sup>21</sup> and gratifying his Athenian friends, might have started in fact from a grain of truth and distorted the facts less blatantly. Such a scenario where Herodotos's misrepresentation of facts would be even less perceptible would underscore even more his great skill as a writer and the necessity to read his work with much awareness of its dual nature, both literary and historical.

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<sup>17</sup> How and Wells 1928, 2: 321; Flower and Marincola 2002, 249.

<sup>18</sup> Plut. *De Her. mal.* 874b, with Hershbelle 1993, 153.

<sup>19</sup> Hdt. 9.78-79, with How and Wells 1928, 2: 321 and Flower and Marincola 2002, 244.

<sup>20</sup> Like in the aforementioned case of the sack of Persepolis. See Diod. Sic. 17.70.4-6.

<sup>21</sup> Iancu 2024, 27-8.

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