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Xenophon's Centaurs

When Xenophon's elder Cyrus proposes that the Persians develop cavalry of their own, his right hand man, Chrysantas, remarks that he has always envied centaurs, as they have the speed and strength of horses, but the hands and minds of men. Chrysantas delicately alludes to the hubristic reputation of centaurs by noting that they cannot properly enjoy either the pleasures of men or those of horses, and reassures the Persians that they will still be able to act as men when they dismount. Cyrus, however, suggests that it be shameful for any Persian with a mount to be seen going on foot anywhere (*Cyropaedia* 4.3). For Cyrus the advantage of having others believe the Persians really are centaurs outweighs any disadvantage in having his Persians act as centaurs all the time.

Does Cyrus make the Persians centaurs? Most still regard him as a positive paradigm, but many are troubled by his more Machiavellian moves, and the scathing final chapter of the *Cyropaedia*. I argue that Xenophon— despite his esteem for cavalry and horsemanship— depicts the development of the Persian cavalry so as to show that the corruption of the Persians takes place under and not only after Cyrus.

Horses, Xenophon says, were rarely seen in Persia before Cyrus' day (1.3.3). This is contrary to what we know of his sources and of historical Persia, but suits the idealized Old Persia of Cyrus' youth with its hardy "peers," *homotimoi*, who fight much as Greek hoplites are supposed to. The young Cyrus encounters horses amidst Median luxuries at the court of Astyages, and the rise of his Persian cavalry parallels the decline of the Persian infantry, which receives superlative praise early in the *Cyropaedia* but performs badly at Thymbara. Cyrus transforms his Persians from heavy infantry peers to flashy cavalry, from idealized Spartans to effeminate Medes.

Now unlike most centaurs of myth, neither Cyrus nor his followers are drunkards or lechers. Cyrus' symposia are utterly sober, and Cyrus does not touch his beautiful captive, Panthea. But Cyrus is not temperate, but at best continent. He cannot trust himself even to look on Panthea (5.1.7-8); contrast Socrates in a similar situation (*Memorabilia* 3.11). Cyrus is neither surprised nor disappointed when the man he chose to watch over Panthea ultimately threatens to rape her (6.1.33). The humor at Cyrus' symposia is forced not because Xenophon has a poor sense of humor but because humor is for Cyrus another means of manipulating his followers. Cyrus may himself appear to be the exceptional noble centaur, a Cheiron among men, but by making the Persians horsemen he corrupts their moderate human half. Little wonder, then, that upon his death his centaur Persians reveal their true nature.

Some essential bibliography

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