

THE INSTITUTE FOR ANACYCLOSIS

EXCERPT FROM
THE HISTORIES
BY HERODOTUS

C. 450 B.C.

Note: This text contains a very early account of the Greek typology of constitutional forms of monarchy (rule by the one) oligarchy (rule by the few) and democracy (rule by the many) and their various virtues and vices. Having at least a rudimentary familiarity with the essential characteristics of the base constitutional forms is useful for understanding Anacyclosis, since Anacyclosis describes the evolutionary path that political society ultimately takes through these various forms. Recall that the base sequence of Anacyclosis is, after all, one-few-many, with the degeneration of popular rule ultimately returning political society to some form of monarchy, thus restarting the sequence.

Book III, Chapters 80-82

After the tumult quieted down, and five days passed, the rebels against the Magi held a council on the whole state of affairs, at which sentiments were uttered which to some Greeks seem incredible, but there is no doubt that they were spoken. Otanes was for turning the government over to the Persian people: "It seems to me," he said, "that there can no longer be a single sovereign over us, for that is not pleasant or good. You saw the insolence of Cambyses, how far it went, and you had your share of the insolence of the Magus. How can monarchy be a fit thing, when the ruler can do what he wants with impunity? Give this power to the best man on earth, and it would stir him to unaccustomed thoughts. Insolence is created in him by the good things to hand, while from birth envy is rooted in man. Acquiring the two he possesses complete evil; for being satiated he does many reckless things, some from insolence, some from envy. And yet an absolute ruler ought to be free of envy, having all good things; but he becomes the opposite of this towards his citizens; he envies the best who thrive and live, and is pleased by the worst of his fellows; and he is the best confidant of slander. Of all men he is the most inconsistent; for if you admire him modestly he is angry that you do not give him excessive attention, but if one gives him excessive attention he is angry because one is a flatter. But I have yet worse to say of him than that; he upsets the ancestral ways and rapes women and kills indiscriminately. But the rule of the multitude has in the first place the loveliest name of all, equality, and does in the second place none of the things that a monarch does. It determines offices by lot, and holds power accountable, and conducts all deliberating publicly. Therefore I give my opinion that we make an end of monarchy and exalt the multitude, for all things are possible for the majority."

Such was the judgment of Otanes: but Megabyzus urged that they resort to an oligarchy. "I agree," said he, "with all that Otanes says against the rule of one; but when he tells you to give the power to the multitude, his judgment strays from the best. Nothing is more foolish and violent than a useless mob; for men fleeing the insolence of a tyrant to fall victim to the insolence of the unguided populace is by no means to be tolerated. Whatever the one does, he does with knowledge, but for the other knowledge is impossible; how can they have knowledge who have not learned or seen for themselves what is best, but always rush headlong and drive blindly onward, like a river in flood? Let those like democracy who wish ill to Persia; but let us choose a group of the best men and invest these with the power. For we ourselves shall be among them, and among the best men it is likely that there will be the best counsels."

Such was the judgment of Megabyzus. Darius was the third to express his opinion. “It seems to me,” he said, “that Megabyzus speaks well concerning democracy but not concerning oligarchy. For if the three are proposed and all are at their best for the sake of argument, the best democracy and oligarchy and monarchy, I hold that monarchy is by far the most excellent. One could describe nothing better than the rule of the one best man; using the best judgment, he will govern the multitude with perfect wisdom, and best conceal plans made for the defeat of enemies. But in an oligarchy, the desire of many to do the state good service often produces bitter hate among them; for because each one wishes to be first and to make his opinions prevail, violent hate is the outcome, from which comes faction and from faction killing, and from killing it reverts to monarchy, and by this is shown how much better monarchy is. Then again, when the people rule it is impossible that wickedness will not occur; and when wickedness towards the state occurs, hatred does not result among the wicked, but strong alliances; for those that want to do the state harm conspire to do it together. This goes on until one of the people rises to stop such men. He therefore becomes the people's idol, and being their idol is made their monarch; and thus he also proves that monarchy is best. But (to conclude the whole matter in one word) tell me, where did freedom come from for us and who gave it, from the people or an oligarchy or a single ruler? I believe, therefore, that we who were liberated through one man should maintain such a government, and, besides this, that we should not alter our ancestral ways that are good; that would not be better.”

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