

Herodotos, Anonymous Wives

Herodotos wrote his comprehensive history in the fifth century BCE; though it's our main source for the Persian Wars with the Greeks (490-478 BCE), Herodotos's larger purpose was to seek to understand human nature and the elements of civilization by comparing and contrasting anecdotes concerning various events and cultures. Excerpted below are tales concerning Candaules and his exhibition of his wife; and the brooch-murdering wives of Athens.¹

Candaules of Sardis

1.6 Croesus was by birth a Lydian, son of Alyattes, and monarch of all the nations west of the river Halys, which flows from the south between Syria and Paphlagonia, and issues northward into the sea called Euxinus. This Croesus was as far as we know the first foreigner who subdued Greeks and took tribute of them, and won the friendship of others, — the former being the Ionians, the Aeolians, and the Dorians of Asia, and the latter the Lacedaemonians. Before the reign of Croesus all Greeks were free: for the Cimmerian host which invaded Ionia before his time did not subdue the cities but rather raided and robbed them.

1.7 Now the sovereign power, which belonged to the descendants of Heracles, fell to the family of Croesus — the Mermnadae as they were called — in the following way. Candaules, whom the Greeks call Myrsilus, was the ruler of Sardis; he was descended from Alcaeus, son of Heracles; Agron, son of Ninus, son of Belus, son of Alcaeus, was the first Heraclid king of Sardis, and Candaules, son of Myrsus, was the last. The kings of this country before Agron were descendants of Lydus, son of Atys, from whom all this Lydian district took its name; before that it was called the land of the Meii. From these the Heraclidae, descendants of Heracles and a female slave of Iardanus, received the sovereignty and held it in charge, by reason of an oracle; and they ruled for two and twenty generations, or 505 years, son succeeding father, down to Candaules, son of Myrsus.

1.8 This Candaules, then, fell in love with his own wife, so much that he supposed her to be by far the fairest woman in the world; and being persuaded of this, he raved of her beauty to Gyges, son of Dascylus, who was his favourite among his bodyguard; for it was to Gyges that he entrusted all his weightiest secrets. Then after a little while Candaules, being doomed to ill-fortune, spoke thus to Gyges: "I think, Gyges, that you do not believe what I tell you of the beauty of my wife; men trust their ears less than their eyes; do you, then, so contrive that you may see her naked." Gyges exclaimed loudly at this. "Master," said he, "what a pestilent command is this that you lay upon me! that I should see her who is my mistress naked! with the stripping off of her tunic a woman is stripped of the honour due to her. Men have long ago made wise rules for our learning; one of these is, that we, and none other, should see what is our own. As for me, I fully believe that your queen is the fairest of all women; ask not lawless acts of me, I entreat you."

1.9 Thus speaking Gyges sought to turn the king's purpose, for he feared lest some ill to himself should come of it: but this was Candaules' answer: Take courage, Gyges: fear not that I say this to put you to the proof, nor that my wife will do you any harm. I will so contrive the whole business that she shall never know that you have seen her. I will bring you into the chamber where she and I lie and set you behind the open door; and after I have entered, my wife too will come to her bed. There is a chair set near the entrance of the room: on this she will lay each part of her raiment as she takes it off, and you will be able to gaze upon her at your leisure. Then, when she goes from the chair to the bed, turning her back upon you, do you look to it that she does not see you going out through the doorway."

¹ Source: Herodotus, and A. D. Godley. 1920. *Herodotus*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

1.10 As Gyges could not escape, he consented. Candaules, when he judged it to be bed time, brought Gyges into the chamber, his wife presently followed, and when she had come in and was laying aside her garments Gyges beheld her; and when she turned her back upon him, going to her bed, he slipped privily from the room. The woman saw him as he passed out, and perceived what her husband had done. But shamed though she was she never cried out nor let it be seen that she had perceived aught, for she had it in mind to punish Candaules; seeing that among the Lydians and most of the foreign peoples it is held great shame that even a man should be seen naked.

1.11 For the nonce she made no sign and held her peace. But as soon as it was day, she assured herself of those of her household whom she perceived to be most faithful to her, and called Gyges: who, supposing that she knew nothing of what had been done, came at call; for he had always been wont to attend the queen whenever she bade him. So when he came, the lady thus addressed him: "Now, Gyges, you have two roads before you; choose which you will follow. You must either kill Candaules and take me for your own and the throne of Lydia, or yourself be killed now without more ado; that will prevent you from obeying all Candaules' commands in the future and seeing what you should not see. One of you must die: either he, the contriver of this plot, or you, who have outraged all usage by looking on me unclad." At this Gyges stood awhile astonished: presently he entreated her not to compel him to such a choice; but when he could not move her, and saw that dire necessity was in very truth upon him either to kill his master or himself be killed by others, he chose his own life. Then he asked the queen to tell him, since she forced him against his will to slay his master, how they were to attack the king: and she replied, "You shall come at him from the same place whence he made you see me naked; attack him in his sleep."

1.12 So when they had made ready this plot, and night had fallen, Gyges followed the lady into the chamber (for he could not get free or by any means escape, but either he or Candaules must die), and she gave him a dagger and hid him behind the same door; and presently he stole out and slew Candaules as he slept, and thus made himself master of the king's wife and sovereignty. He is mentioned in the iambic verses of Archilochus of Parus who lived about the same time.

1.13 So he took possession of the sovereign power, and was confirmed therein by the Delphic oracle. For when the Lydians were much angered by the fate of Candaules, and took up arms, the faction of Gyges and the rest of the people came to an agreement that if the oracle should ordain him to be king of the Lydians, then he should reign: but if not, then he should render back the kingship to the Heraclidae. The oracle did so ordain: and Gyges thus became king. Howbeit the Pythian priestess declared that Heraclidae should have vengeance on Gyges' posterity in the fifth generation: an utterance of which the Lydians and their kings took no account, till it was fulfilled.

The brooches of Athens

5.87 This, then, is the story told by the Argives and Aeginetans, and the Athenians too acknowledge that it was only one man of them who came safe back to Attica [from the disastrous raid at Aegina]; but the Argives say that it was they, and the Athenians say that it was divine power, that destroyed the Attic army when this one man was saved alive; albeit even this one (say the Athenians) was not saved alive but perished as here related. It would seem that he made his way to Athens and told of the mishap; and when this was known (it is said) to the wives of the men who had gone to attack Aegina, they were very wroth that he alone should be safe out of all, and they gathered round him and stabbed him with the brooch-pins of their garments, each asking him "where her man was."

5.88 Thus was this man done to death; and this deed of their women seemed to the Athenians to be yet more dreadful than their misfortune. They could find, it is said, no other way to punish the women; but they changed their dress to the Ionian fashion; for till then the Athenian women had worn Dorian dress, very like to the Corinthian; it was changed, therefore, to the linen tunic, that so they might have no brooch-pins to use. But if the truth be told, this dress is not in its origin Ionian, but Carian; for in Hellas itself all the women's dress in ancient times was the same as that which we now call Dorian. As for the Argives and Aeginetans, this was the reason of their even making a law for each of their nations that their brooch pins should be made half as long again as the measure then customary, and that brooch-pins in especial should be dedicated by their women in the temple of those goddesses; and that neither aught else Attic should be brought to the temple, nor earthenware, but that it be the law to drink there from vessels of the country.

5.89 So then the women of Argolis and Aegina ever since that day wore brooch-pins longer than before, by reason of the feud with the Athenians, and so they did even to my time; and the enmity of the Athenians against the Aeginetans began as I have told. And now at the Thebans' call the Aeginetans came readily to the aid of the Boeotians, remembering the business of the images.