Aeschylus

Persians

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Translator's Note

In the following text, the numbers without brackets refer to the lines in the English text, and those in square brackets refer to the lines in the Greek text. Indented partial lines are included with the line above in the reckoning. All stage directions and footnotes have been provided by the translator.

In this translation, possessives of names ending in -s are usually indicated in the common way (that is, by adding -’s (e.g. Zeus and Zeus’s)). This convention adds a syllable to the spoken word (the sound -iz). Sometimes, for metrical reasons, this English text indicates such possession in an alternate manner, with a simple apostrophe. This form of the possessive does not add an extra syllable to the spoken name (e.g., Xerxes and Xerxes’ are both two-syllable words).

Historical Note

Aeschylus (c.525 BC to c.456 BC) is one of the three great Greek tragic dramatists whose works have survived. Of his many plays, seven still remain. Aeschylus may have fought against the Persians at Marathon (490 BC), and he did so again at Salamis (480 BC). According to tradition, he died from being hit with a tortoise dropped by an eagle. After
his death, the Athenians, as a mark of respect, permitted his works to be restaged in their annual competitions.

Aeschylus’s play *The Persians* was first produced in 472 BC. It is believed to be the oldest surviving play in our traditions. Originally the work was the second part of a trilogy: the first play was called *Phineus*, and the third *Glaucus*. These were followed by a satyr play, *Prometheus Pyrcaeus*. It is not immediately clear how the subject matter of the missing plays is related to the *Persians*.

Persian armies launched two famous invasions against the Greek mainland. The first (in 490 BC) was sponsored by Darius, king of Persia. It ended at the Battle of Marathon close to Athens with a Greek victory, in which the Athenians played the major role. The second Persian expedition (in 480 BC) was sponsored and led by Xerxes, son of Darius, who had succeeded his father as king, after Darius’s death.

A major reason for these invasions was to punish Athens for its assistance to Greek cities in Asia Minor and on some of the islands close by, an important part of the Persians’ sphere of influence. These cities had close ethnic links to the Greeks, especially to the Athenians, and resented Persian domination. Hence, they were a source of conflict within the Persian Empire.
PERSIANS

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

ATOSSA: queen of Persia, mother of Xerxes, wife of Darius.¹
MESSENGER: a soldier with Xerxes’s army.
DARIUS: a ghost, father of Xerxes, once king of Persia.
XERXES: king of Persia, son of Darius and Atossa.
CHORUS: elder statesmen of Persia.

[The action takes place in Susa, the capital of the Persian Empire, in front of a large building.² The Chorus enters.]

CHORUS LEADER

We are here as trustworthy delegates
for all those Persians who have marched away
to the land of Greece. Thanks to our old age,
we are the guardians of the royal home,
so rich in gold, the men Xerxes himself,
our king, son of Darius, has chosen
to supervise his realm. But here inside,
my heart has for a long time been troubled
about our golden army’s journey home
and the king’s return. It senses trouble.¹⁰
For all the power born out of Asia
has gone, responding to our young king’s call,
and yet here in the Persians’ capital
no horseman has come back, no courier.
Streaming out of Susa and Agbatana
and the ancient parapets of Kissa,
our forces moved away, some on horseback,
some by ship, some on foot—a close-packed mass
prepared for war—men like Artaphrenes,
Amistres, Pastas, and Megabates,²⁰
commanders of Persia’s warrior host,
all kings and yet all ruled by our Great King,
leaders of a vast army on the march,
experts in archery and horsemanship,
fearful to look at and terrible in war,
their spirits steeled for battle. With them there
is Artembares the charioteer,
as well as Masistes, noble Imaeus

¹The name Atossa is not mentioned in the Greek manuscripts, but the name is well known.
²It is not totally clear from the text whether the building is the royal palace or a special council building or something else entirely.
so deadly with his bow, Pharandaces, 
and Sosthanes, who drives his horses on.  
The fertile mighty Nile sent others, too—
Sousiscanes, Egyptian-born Pegastagon, 
Sesame, great king of sacred Memphis,  
Ariomardos, who rules in ancient Thebes, 
and from the marshes men who row the ships, 
a frightening horde in countless numbers. 
And with them goes a crowd of Lydians, 
luxury loving men, whose force controls 
all mainland tribes, warrior ranks sent out 
with noble Arcteus and Mitrogathes, 
a royal command, and gold-rich Sardis—
huge thongs of chariots streaming out, 
row after row of three- and four-horse teams, 
a terrifying sight! And men who live 
by sacred Tmolus now threaten to hurl 
the yoke of slavery upon the Greeks— 
Mardon and Tharybis, with thunderbolts 
for spears, and Mysians armed with javelins. 
And Babylon, awash with gold, sends out 
huge columns of men of different kinds, 
sailors on ships and other troops whose strength 
relies on skill in fighting with the bow. 
The sabre-bearing races also come 
from all of Asia, following the king, 
a fearful expedition on the march! 
Warriors like these move out, the flower 
of Persian lands, while all of Asia yearns. 
Their nurturing mother now longs for them 
and groans with fierce desire, as wives and children 
count the days and shudder at the long delay.  

CHORUS

Obliterating cities as it moves, 
our royal army has already marched 
to neighbouring lands on the facing shore,

1The mainland referred to is Asia Minor (as opposed to the islands). Many cities in this region, especially along the coast, were part of the Persian Empire but inhabited by Ionians, that is, by Greeks closely related to the Athenians. The Greek cities resented Persian rule and had rebelled against it in the past. The three- or four-horse teams mentioned refers to the number of horses who rode abreast.

2Lydia is a region in Asia Minor. Tmolus is a mountain near the Persian city of Sardis. The Mysians came from northern Asia Minor. Greek traditions stressed the enormous size of Xerxes’s forces. Herodotus’s (no doubt exaggerated) claim puts the number of soldiers and army followers at over three million.
crossing the Hellespont, that narrow sea which gets its name from Athamas’s child, on a floating bridge tied down with cable and throwing the yoke of a tight-knit road across the neck of the sea.¹

Through every land the fiery king of a massive Asian horde drives on his men—a wondrous warrior pack—in a double formation by land and sea, with trust in his brave and stern commanders, our golden born and godlike king.

His dark eyes burn with the glare of a snake aroused to kill. Soldiers and sailors massing behind him, he urges his Syrian chariot on, leading his archers like a war god’s host to fight against men renowned for their spears.

No man has the strength to repel this force, this irresistible torrent of men, or with a strong bulwark to hold in check the overpowering surge of the sea. For warriors fill our Persian ranks, our invincible force of fearless men.

By decrees of the gods since earliest times, Fate has ruled all and has always ordained that Persians wage war, knocking down towers, fighting in chariots, and demolishing cities.

By trusting their finely made cables and ships our men have now learned how to gaze on the deep when tempestuous storms from the howling winds whip white surface waters across the broad sea.

¹One of the two narrow straits separating Asia from Europe was named after Helle, a daughter of Athamas, who fell from the sky and drowned in the water there. Xerxes led his immense army across this obstacle on a bridge made of boats. The boats were tied together with cables and chains, and then planks and earth were placed on top to make a roadway. A Persian fleet accompanied the army.
But what mortal man can hope to evade
insidious deceit of the gods? What man
with nimble feet can leap above that snare?

For fair Delusion, with her welcoming smile,
spreads her nets wide and lures the man in.
There is no escape—that trap she sets
no man evades by springing back once more.

Such matters hang black thoughts around my heart
and tear at it with fear. Alas for them,
the soldiers of that mighty Persian force!
May our great city Sousa never hear
a cry like that or learn its men have died.

And Kissa’s city folk will then all chant
their own song in reply—Alas! That crowd
of women screaming out will tear apart
their splendid robes of linen.

For all our men—
our horse and infantry—like swarms of bees,
have left with the lord who leads our army,
 crossing the cape the two continents share,
now Xerxes has yoked them both together.

Our marriage beds long for the absent men
and fill with tears, as Persian women grieve,
each one with a woman’s heartfelt yearning
for the fearless warrior she sent away.
Her man is gone, and now she sleeps alone.

CHORUS LEADER
Come now, Persians, let us take our seats
within this ancient place. Let us reflect,
for at this time we need to turn our thoughts
to wise and well-considered counsel
about what is happening with our king,
Xerxes, son of Darius. Have Persian archers
drawn their bows and won, or have the Greeks
with the power of their sharp spears prevailed?
[Atossa enters with attendants.]

But look—the mother of our king approaches, like light streaming from the eye of god. I must prostrate myself before my queen, and all of you must show her your respect—salute her majesty with words of welcome.

[The Chorus Leader prostrates himself and speaks to Atossa from his knees.]

Hail to you, O queen, most illustrious of all deep-waisted Persian women—Xerxes’ aged mother and wife of Darius, once the consort of Persia’s god and now the mother of their god—unless perhaps the divinity they used to have of old has now abandoned Persian warriors.

Atossa

That is why I have left my gold-decked home and the royal bed I shared with Darius and have come here. For worries rend my heart. My friends, I will confide in you—I am afraid that our vast wealth will quickly stir up dust and with its foot cast down the great success which—thanks to the assistance of some god—king Darius achieved. And that is why my mind is burdened with a double care, which I find difficult to speak about. The common folk do not respect great wealth unless backed up with men, and though the poor may have great strength, the light of their success will never shine. Now, we have wealth enough, but still I fear for what I hold to be our finest treasure, true riches in the home, the lord and master’s eye. Since that is so,
Persians, you old trustworthy counsellors, advise me what to do, since all my hopes for level-headed guidance rest on you.

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1Atossa’s entry here is probably meant to be imperially splendid, with chariots and an impressive escort, in contrast to her entry later in the play. There is no sense that she enters from the building at the back.
CHORUS LEADER
You are our country’s queen—so rest assured
you do not need to ask us twice for help,
for anything that lies with our power
to say or do. You have summoned us here
as counsellors in this affair, and we
are well disposed to serve your interests.

ATOSSA
Many dreams keep visiting me at night—
all the time—ever since my son prepared
his army and set off, hoping to destroy
Ionian lands. But this past night
I had one more distinct than all the rest.
I will describe it to you. I seemed to see
two women dressed in very lovely clothes—
one wore Persian robes, the other Dorian.¹
They came in view—both of gigantic size,
much larger than the women of today,
and very beautiful. They were sisters,
of the same family line. One of them
lived in Hellenic lands, assigned by lot,
the other dwelt among barbarians.²
And as I watched, I seemed to see these two
begin to fight each other. Then my son,
onece he learned of this, tried to hold them back
and calm them down. Around their necks he set
a collar strap and yoked it to his chariot.
One sister carried her restraint with pride
and kept her mouth compliant in the reins.
The other one fought back—her hands tore at
the chariot harness and, freed from her restraint,
dragged it so hard she broke the yoke in two.
My son fell out headfirst, and Darius,
his father, who stood close by, was grieving.
Then Xerxes, when he saw his father there,
shred the garments covering his body.
That was the dream I saw during the night.
When I got up, I went to wash my hands

¹The Dorians were an ethnic group within the Greek people (and frequent rivals of the Ionians). They were commonly associated with Sparta, the most important Dorian city.
²Hellenic means Greek. The word barbarian, a term the Greeks used to refer to non-Greeks, is here a reference to Persia.
in a flowing spring, and holding up a gift,  
I stood beside an altar, intending  
to offer sacrifice to those deities  
who ward off evil, with those rituals  
which are their due. But then I saw an eagle  
swooping down for safety at the altar  
of Apollo, and I was terrified.  
My friends, as I stood there speechless, I saw  
a hawk racing up behind, wings outspread.  
Its talons clawed and ripped the eagle’s head.  
The eagle did not fight but cowered down  
and left its body open to attack.  
Seeing this visions made me so afraid—  
and hearing them you must be fearful, too.  
For you know well that if my son succeeds  
he will become a man men hold in awe,  
but even if he fails, those in the city  
cannot hold him accountable, for Xerxes,  
if he gets safely back, still rules this land.

CHORUS LEADER  
Lady mother, we do not wish our words  
to make you fearful or offer you false hope.  
But if what you have seen is ominous,  
approach the gods with prayers, begging them  
to avert the evil and bring about  
what is of benefit to you, your sons,  
the city, all your family and friends.  
Then you must pour libations to the earth  
and to the dead, and with auspicious words  
ask Darius, your husband, whom you say  
you saw last night, to confer his blessing  
from underneath the earth up to the light,  
on you and on your son, and to hold down  
what works against you and keep it buried  
deep within the earth, hidden in the dark.  
From what I understand of prophecy  
and as a friend I give you this advice.  
I sense that in these matters everything  
will turn out favourably for you.

ATOSSA  
You are the first one who has offered me  
an interpretation of the dreams I had,
and you have clearly shown in what you say
your kindness to my child and family.
May things all turn out well! When I return
back to the palace, I will carry out
those rituals for the gods and loved ones
underneath the earth, the way you have advised.
But, friends, there is one thing I wish to know.
In what part of the world do people say
this city of Athens is located?

CHORUS LEADER
Far away from here, where our Lord the Sun
grows dim and sets.

ATOSSA
And is it really true
my son desired to conquer such a place?

CHORUS LEADER
Yes, he did. For then all lands in Hellas
would be subject to our King.

ATOSSA
And these Greeks—
does their army consist of many men?

CHORUS LEADER
Their army has been strong enough before
to have done much damage to the Medes.¹

ATOSSA
Are their hands trained to fight with well-strung bows?²

CHORUS LEADER
No, not at all—they arm themselves with shields
and fight in close with spears.

¹The terms Mede and Persian were, for the Greeks, synonymous. The Athenians were the most important element in the Greek force which had defeated Darius’s expeditionary army at Marathon ten years earlier (in 490 BC). Some editors believe that two lines are missing immediately before this passage, another question from Atossa and an answer from the Chorus.

²I have followed some other editors in rearranging the lines slightly here to achieve a more logical sequence in the series of questions and answers.
PERSIANS

ATOSSA What other things do they possess? Do they have wealth at home—all the money they need?

CHORUS LEADER They have a mine, a fountain of silver—their country’s treasure.¹

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ATOSSA Who governs them? Who commands their army?

CHORUS LEADER People say they are no man’s slaves or servants.

ATOSSA Then how can they turn back a fierce attack when warlike men invade?

CHORUS LEADER Well, they managed to destroy that great and glorious force which Darius had sent against them.

ATOSSA For those whose sons have left, those words of yours are ominous to think of.

CHORUS LEADER It seems to me you will soon know the truth of what’s gone on. Why else would a Persian man be rushing here. He must be bringing news of some event—it’s clearly something good or bad.

[Enter the Messenger, in great haste. He falls prostrate before Atossa and delivers his first speeches from his knees]

MESSENGER O you cities throughout all Asian lands, O realm of Persia, haven of vast wealth, one blow has smashed your great prosperity—

¹Attica, the region around Athens, had very profitable silver mines.
the flower of Persia has been destroyed!
Our men have perished! Alas! It’s terrible
to be first to tell disastrous news,
and yet, you Persians, I must now provide
a full report of that catastrophe—
our whole barbarian army has been killed!

CHORUS
Such dreadful, dreadful news!
So cruel and unforeseen.
Alas! Alas! Weep now,
you Persians, as you learn
of this calamity!

MESSENGER
Yes, weep, for all those men have been wiped out,
while I look on this unexpected day
when I have come back home.

CHORUS
For older men, this life of ours
has been too long, it seems—
we have to learn about
this unanticipated grief.

MESSENGER
I was there—I did not hear what happened
from other men—so, Persians, I can speak
directly of the evil things we faced.

CHORUS
Aaaaii! Our great host
with all its different weapons
set out from Asian lands in vain
to the mighty land of Hellas!

MESSENGER
The corpses fill the shores of Salamis
and all the coasts nearby—our wretched dead.¹

¹Salamis is an island in the Saronic Gulf, close to Athens. It was famous for its sailors. Once Xerxes’s army entered Greece, it was at first successful, moving past Thermopylae down into central Greece and raising alarm in Athens and elsewhere. The Athenians, placing their faith in their formidable navy, abandoned the city and moved to Salamis with their fleet.
CHORUS
Alas! Such grief! You say
the bodies of the ones we love
are tossing in the surf,
being driven back and forth
and carried by the shifting waves.

MESSENGER
Our bows were no defence. Our men perished.
The entire force was overwhelmed at sea
when Ionian ships attacked our fleet.

CHORUS
Cry a sorrowful lament,
a pitiful dirge for our dead,
those ill-starred Persian men!
The gods bring all this evil!
Aaaaiii! Aaaaiii!
The army is now gone!

MESSENGER
That name Salamis—a hateful word,
the most offensive to my ears. Alas,
how I groan when I remember Athens!

CHORUS
Yes, Athens is hateful to her foes!
We well recall how Athens made
so many Persian women widows
by slaughtering their men.¹

ATOSSA
I have kept quiet for a long time here,
struck silent by the news of this defeat.
For this event is too calamitous
to talk or even ask about the pain.
Yet suffering is something mortal beings
must learn to bear when it comes from the gods.
So stand up now and speak. Give your report—
and even if you groan at this bad news,

¹This reference to the battle of Marathon emphasizes the vital role played by the Athenians in the combined Greek force which defeated the army Darius has sent.
describe the full extent of our defeat.  
Who did not die? What about the leaders?  
Which ones should we mourn? And of all those men appointed to a sceptre-bearing post, which ones have died and left a vacancy among the ranks of our commanders?

[The Messenger stands up.]

MESSENGER  
Xerxes himself survived—he is alive and sees the light of day.

ATOSSA  

What you have said brings a great light of hope into my home, a bright dawn after grim black drapes of night.

MESSENGER  
But Artembares, who led ten thousand horse, is being smashed against the cruel shores of Salamis, and Dadaces, who led a thousand men, was hit by a spear and with an easy leap fell from his ship. Tenagon, the finest of that ancient race from Bactria, now moves around the isle of Ajax, a coastline pounded by the sea.¹ Lilaios, Arsames, and a third one, Argestes, are washed around that island, a breeding place for doves, as they are thrown against its rugged shore. Of all those men living beside the springs of Egypt’s Nile, Pharnouchos fell, and three men from one ship, Pheresseues and Adeues and Arcteus. And Matallos from Chryse, who ruled an army of ten thousand men, as he died, stained his thick, dark, shaggy beard and changed its colour with a blood-red dye. Arabos the Magian perished there, and so did Artabes from Bactria, who led black horsemen thirty thousand strong

¹The name Ajax refers to the Greater Ajax, king of Salamis, who in the Iliad is the mightiest Greek warrior after Achilles.
and now has settled deep in rocky ground, as well as Amistris and Amphistreus, who held a deadly spear, and Aриомардус, a noble man whose death makes Sardis grieve, and Seisames from Mysia. Tharybis, commander of two hundred fifty ships, a handsome man, by birth a Lyrnaean, now lies in miserable death—his luck abandoned him. And Suennesis, too, who ruled Cilicians and by himself brought so much suffering to his enemies, for of courageous men he was the best, fought valiantly and died. I have listed these men by name, but we lost so many! What I have told you mentions just a few.

AТОSSA
Alas! Alas! I have listened to your words, the height of our misfortune—a disgrace to Persia, cause enough for screams of grief. But return to your report and tell me this—What was the number of the Grecian fleet? What made them confident enough to risk a fight at sea with Persian ships?

MESSENGER
You can be sure that we barbarians would have overwhelmed their fleet, if numbers had been the only thing. For the Greeks had, in total, three hundred ships. Ten of these were chosen as a special group. But Xerxes—I can confirm this—led a thousand ships, two hundred and seven of which could sail extremely fast. That’s how the numbers stood. Surely you cannot think that when we fought we were outnumbered? No. Some deity did not weigh the scales of fortune fairly and destroyed our fleet. The gods protect that city of the goddess Pallas.¹

¹Pallas is a reference to Athena, the patron goddess of Athens.
ATOSSA  And so,  
the city of Athens remains unscathed.¹

MESSENGER  
Yes. While its citizens are still alive  
it has a fortress that will never fail.

ATOSSA  
Tell me how the battle with the ships began.  
Who was the first to fight? Was it the Greeks?  
Or was my son happy to engage their fleet,  
given the huge number of his ships?

MESSENGER  
My queen, a demon or evil spirit  
appeared from somewhere and set in motion  
everything that led to our complete collapse.  
A man from the Athenian forces,  
a Greek, came to Xerxes, your son, and said  
that after night arrived and it grew dark  
the Greeks would not remain where they were now,  
but leap onto the benches in their ships  
and, by moving stealthily here and there,  
would try to row away and save their lives.  
Xerxes did not sense the Greek man’s cunning  
or the envy of the gods.² So once he heard  
what the man had said, he quickly issued  
the following orders to his captains:

“When the sun’s rays no longer warm the earth  
and darkness seizes regions of the sky,  
draw up the ships into a triple line  
and block the exits to the roaring sea.  
With other vessels form a tight blockade  
around that isle of Ajax. If the Greeks  
escape their evil fate and somehow find  
a secret way to steal off in their ships,  
my orders are that all will lose their heads.”

¹The city of Athens had, in fact, been ravaged by the Persian army, which occupied the city, because the citizens had abandoned the town and gone to Salamis and Aegina.
²The phrase envy of the gods refers to the belief that the gods were jealous of a mortal being’s success and punished him for it, especially when the display of his greatness became excessive.
When Xerxes said these words, his heart and mind were fully confident—he had no inkling of what the gods had planned. His men obeyed. Their spirits showed no lack of discipline, as they prepared a meal and every sailor lashed his oar in place against the thole pin. Once the sun’s light had disappeared and night came creeping in, each master of his oar and all the soldiers under arms went down into the ships, and as the long boats sailed to take up their assigned positions, row by row, the men called out to cheer each other on. So all night long the officers and crews kept sailing back and forth on their patrol, yet as night passed, the Greek force did not try to slip away in secret. But when the day rode up with her white steeds and radiant light seized all the earth, at first we heard a shout. A resounding cry came from the Greeks—it sounded like a song—and right away the echo brought a clarion response reverberating from the island rocks. Then panic struck the whole barbarian fleet. Our plan had failed, for at that point the Greeks did not call out their solemn holy cry as if they meant to flee. No. They sounded like men who meant to fight with courage in their hearts. And when a trumpet pealed, they all caught fire. Then, once the order came, with one united sweep their foaming oars struck the salty sea, and their fleet of ships quickly came in sight, all clearly visible. First of all, their well-organized right wing advanced in order. Then the entire force moved up, and, as it did, we all could hear a mighty cry:

“You offspring of the Greeks, come on! Free your native home! Free your wives, your children, the temples of your father’s gods, the burial places of your ancestors! The time has come to fight for all of these!”
We responded with a confusing shout from Persian tongues, but by now the crisis left no time to delay. For right away, the ships began to use their bronze-clad prows to ram each other. In the first attack a Greek ship completely smashed the bow on a Phoenician boat, and after that both rival navies went at one another. At first, the bulk of the Persian forces held them back. But with so many vessels confined inside a narrow space, our ships could provide no help to other Persians. Instead their bronze prows rammed their own fleet’s ships and smashed the banks of oars. Meanwhile the Greeks did not fail to seize this opportunity—they formed a circle round us and attacked. Our ships’ hulls capsized, and the waves grew full of shattered boats and slaughtered sailors, so much so we could not glimpse the sea. Beaches and rocks were crowded with the dead. As all the ships left in our barbarian fleet rushed off to escape in great confusion, the Greeks kept butchering men in the sea, hacking away at them with broken oars and bits of wreckage, as if our sailors were schools of mackerel or loads of fish. Groans and screams of pain filled the open sea, until night’s shadowy eye concealed the scene. But I could not describe the full extent of the disaster to you, not even if I spoke of it for ten entire days. For you must understand that never before has such an enormous multitude of men all perished in a single day.

ATOSSA

Alas!

An immense sea of evil has engulfed the Persians and our whole barbarian race!

MESSENGER

But listen—there is more. I have not mentioned half our troubles yet. For our men suffered evils twice as heavy as the ones before.
ATOSSA
What troubles worse than what you have described
could have hurt our army? Speak! You talked of
some catastrophe. What could have happened
to sink our scale of evil even further?

MESSENGER
All those Persians in their prime of life,
the very finest spirits, whose noble birth
made them exceptional, the foremost men,
who always had the trust of our Great King,
have met a most dishonourable fate
and died in shame.

ATOSSA
O my friends, this disaster
compounds my misery! What kind of fate
do you say killed these splendid men?

MESSENGER
There is an island in front of Salamis—
a tiny place, but hazardous for ships.¹
Dance-loving Pan lives there, close to the shore.
Xerxes had placed his finest warriors here,
so that, when our defeated enemies
moved from the ships and sought a refuge
on that island, his men could overwhelm
the Grecian force where it was vulnerable,
and they could save the lives of any friends
trapped in the sea within that narrow strait.
But Xerxes’ judgment of events was wrong.
For when some god gave glory to the Greeks
in the battle out at sea, that very day
they walled themselves in armour made of bronze,
leapt out of their ships, and formed a circle
around the island, so that our soldiers
had nowhere to escape. Many of our men
were hit with stones thrown by enemy hands
or died from falling arrows shot from bows.
At last in one concerted charge, the Greeks
attacked, hacking away at Persian limbs

¹The island was called Psytteleia.
until the lives of all those pitiful men had been utterly destroyed. From high up on a promontory right beside the sea Xerxes watched. He had an excellent view of his entire army, and, as he looked and witnessed the extent of this defeat, he groaned, tore his robes, gave out a shrill cry, and quickly issued orders to his troops, who ran away confused. This defeat and the other one I talked of earlier—these are the disasters you must grieve.

ATOSSA
O hateful demon, how you have deceived the Persians! That famous city Athens has taken harsh revenge against my son—not satisfied with those barbarians she killed at Marathon in years gone by. By seeking retribution for those men, my son has brought himself a multitude of grief. What about the ships that got away? Tell me where you left them. And do you have a clear idea of where they might be now?

MESSENGER
Those in charge of our surviving ships quickly fled away in great disorder, on whatever course the winds might take them. The remnants of our army was destroyed in lands of the Boeotians—some of them near a refreshing spring where they had gone, driven there by thirst. Others among us, exhausted and short of breath, kept marching into Phocian land—reaching Doris and the Gulf of Malia, where Spercheios pours his fresh waters on the plain. And then, desperate for food, we kept moving on to the Achaean plain, where we were welcomed by Thessalians in their cities. But here, most of our men died of thirst or hunger, for we were suffering from both. From there, we reached the place where the Magnesians live and Macedonian land—the river Axios, Bolbe’s reed-filled marsh, and Mount Pangaeon,
on Edonian ground. But during the night some spirit stirred up winter before its time. The stream of the sacred river Strymon was completely frozen, and all those men who had given the gods no thought till then at that point offered up their solemn prayers with supplications to both Earth and Heaven. Once the army had finished calling out its many invocations to the gods, we moved on across the frozen river. Some of us, those who left before the god could scatter his rays, crossed the ice in safety, but once the brilliant circle of the sun with his hot beams had warmed the middle part and melted it with fire, then men fell through, stumbling against each other. And the man who lost the breath of life most rapidly was truly lucky. The ones who got across saved themselves by moving on through Thrace, though not without much pain and suffering. Not many of those fugitives escaped and reached their native land. Now is the time our Persian city should lament its loss, grieving for the most cherished youthful men in all our land. What I have said is true. But I have left out many dreadful things which a god has hurled down on the Persians.

[Exit Messenger.]

CHORUS LEADER
O savage demon! With what heavy weight your feet have stamped on all the Persian race!

ATOSSA
This overpowers me—the utter ruin of our entire force! Those visions last night—the ones I saw so clearly in my dreams—how plainly they revealed these blows to me. Your sense of them was far too trivial. But nonetheless, following your advice,

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1The defeated Persian troops moved north from Salamis, trying to return to Asia Minor by land via the Hellespont. The places mentioned are listed more or less in geographical order.
I will begin by praying to the gods, and then I will return, bringing offerings for the Earth and for the dead—a libation from my home. I know I will be worshipping after all that has already happened, but I am hoping better things will come to us in future. Given these events, you men should demonstrate your loyalty by offering me trustworthy counsel. And if, while I am gone, my son arrives, comfort him, accompany him back home, so no misfortune comes to trouble him, apart from those we have already faced.

[Exit Atossa.]

CHORUS LEADER
O Zeus, king, now you have destroyed the overconfident armed multitude of the Persian army, shrouding the cities of Susa and Agbatana in gloom and overwhelming sorrow. And many women share our grief, ripping their veils with gentle hands, soaking their bosoms drenched in tears. With agonizing female cries the wives of Persia yearn to see those men they married only recently. They leave their wedding beds, the softly quilted joys of youth, and howl with grief that has no end. And I, in great distress, take on myself the dreadful fate of those who are now gone.

CHORUS
Now indeed all lands in Asia mourn their absent men! Xerxes marched them off to war, alas! Xerxes, to our sorrow, killed our men! Xerxes, in his folly, took them all and set out with a seagoing fleet. Why then did Darius, while he lived and ruled our city’s archer armies,
remain unhurt and so well loved by those who dwell in Susa?

Our troops on foot and sailors left in the dark-eyed ships—alas!—and went away on linen wings.¹ Then other ships destroyed them, obliterating all with their assault at the hands of sailors from Ionia. And as we hear, our king himself escaped, but only just, through Thrace, on frozen paths across the plains.

Lament for those who perished earlier, abandoned by necessity—alas!—along Cychrean shores.² Such grief! Scramble out your sorrow, clench your teeth, let cries of anguished mourning climb the heights of heaven—alas!—draw out your long and piteous moans.

They are torn by the deadly surf—alas!—and gnawed by those voiceless children of the unpolluted seas—alas!
The grieving household mourns its absent lord, and parents whose children now are dead cry out against the heaven-sent pain, while the old, in sorrow, hear of those men’s agonies in full.

Now other men in Asian lands no longer will abide by Persian laws, no longer pay the Persians tribute, under compulsion from our king. No longer will they fall down prostrate on the ground and worship him. For the power of our king is gone! No more will people check their tongues, for now they have the liberty to speak their minds without restraint.

¹Ships often had eyes painted on their prows to make them look like sea creatures.
²The phrase Cychrean shores is a reference to Salamis.
The yoke of force has been removed,
and on that isle where Ajax ruled,
the blood-soaked rocks, washed by the sea,
now hold the power of Persia.

*Enter Atossa, this time without an escort.*

**ATOSSA**

My friends, whoever has experienced disaster understands that when a wave of trouble breaks over mortal men, they are inclined to be afraid of everything, and then, when good fortune blows their way once more, they start believing that this same good luck will keep on blowing them success forever. In my case, all things now look full of dread. My eyes can see the gods are enemies, and in my ears echoes a sound that brings no note of joy. I am so overwhelmed by these disasters—they have made my mind so anxious and afraid. And that is why I come here from the palace once again without my chariots, without that pomp I used to have before, bringing offerings for the father of my son, libations to propitiate and appease the dead—sweet white milk from an unblemished cow and splendid honey, distilled from flowers by the bees, with water from a virgin spring, and from their rustic mother earth I bring this unmixed drink, the delightful produce of the ancient vine, and this sweet-smelling fruit from the plant whose leaves are always green, the golden olive, with wreaths of flowers.¹ But you, my friends, should chant a choral song to summon up the spirit of Darius, while I pour these libations to the dead and make an offering for the earth to drink, in honour of the gods who rule below.

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¹These words suggest that Atossa’s earlier entrance involves a display of royal magnificence, in contrast to her appearance now.
CHORUS LEADER
O royal lady, whom Persians all revere,
pour out your offerings to the earth beneath,
down to the chambers of the dead, while we
in song will beg those gods who guide
the dead down there to treat us kindly.

O you sacred gods of the world beneath,
Earth and Hermes, and you, O ruling king
of those who perish, send that man's spirit
[630]
from down below up here into the light.¹
For if he knows of any further help
730
in our misfortunes, of all mortal men
he is the only one who can advise us
how to bring that remedy to bear.

CHORUS
Our sacred, godlike king,
does he attend to me,
as my obscure barbarian voice
sends out these riddling, wretched cries.
I will bewail my dreadful sorrow.
Does he hear me down below?

But you, O Earth, and you others,
740 [640]
you powers beneath the earth,
release his splendid spirit
from your homes—the divine one
born in Susa, the Persians’ god.
Send him up here, that man whose like
was never laid to rest in Persian ground.

The man is loved, as is his tomb—
we love the virtue buried there.
O Aidoneus, Aidoneus,
who sends shades from the dead,
750 [650]
send Darius up here to us,
send back our godlike king.²

¹The ruler of the underworld is Hades, brother of Zeus and Poseidon. The spirit the Chorus wishes to conjugate up is, of course, Darius.

²Aidoneus is an alternative name for Hades, god of the dead.
That ruler never lost our men
to ruinous death in war,
and Persians hailed him as divine
in his wise counsel, for, like a god,
when he led his army out to fight,
he planned things brilliantly. Alas!

O king, our old Great King,
approach us now, draw near. 760
Rise to the summit of your tomb,
lift up the saffron slipper on your foot,
reveal the royal ornaments
of your imperial crown,
and come to us, O father Darius,
who never caused us pain.

Come listen to our latest grief,
the sorrow felt throughout this land.
O king of Persia’s king, appear.
For over us the darkness spreads,
a Stygian gloom, since our young men
have just been utterly destroyed.¹
So come to us, O father Darius,
who never caused us pain.

Aaaaiii! Aaaaiii!
O you whose death was mourned
so bitterly among your friends,
O great and powerful king,
[if you had been in full command
who in this land would now be grieving
such twin calamitous defeats?]²
Our three-tiered ships—now ships no more—
have been completely overwhelmed. 780
Our ships are ships no more!

[The Ghost of Darius appears.]

DARIUS
You loyal men in whom I placed my trust,
you ancient Persians, once my youthful friends,

¹The Styx was a major river in the underworld.
²The precise meaning of these lines is not altogether clear.
what troubles are now threatening the state?
The soil is beaten down and torn apart—it
it groans in great distress. I see my wife
beside my tomb, and so I grow concerned.
I have received the offerings she made
with favour, while you men have been standing here,
close to my grave, chanting your laments,
as with loud cries to summon up the dead
you have been calling piteously for me.
But there is no easy path from down below.
Beneath the earth the gods are much more prone
to welcome bodies than to send them back.
Still, I do have some authority down there,
and I have come. But you must not waste time,
so I do not get blamed for my delay.
What new disaster weighs the Persians down?

CHORUS
That fear of you I had in earlier days
makes me too awestruck now to look at you,
and reverence inhibits what I say.

DARIUS
But since I have responded to your cries
and come up here from underneath the earth,
you must ignore the awe that I inspire
and speak. Tell me everything that has gone on.
But keep the details brief—no lengthy story.

CHORUS
I am afraid to act on your request,
too full of fear to speak directly to you
and say things hard to tell to those one loves.

DARIUS
Since ancient reverence affects your minds,

[Turning toward Atossa]

will you, noble and venerable queen,
who shared my bed, hold back your tears and groans
and speak quite frankly to me. We all know
that mortal blows will fall on mortal men.
Many from the sea, many from the land
PERSIANS

afflict all human beings, as their long lives keep stretching through the years.

ATOSSA
O you, whose happy fate made you surpass all other men in your prosperity, as long as you gazed at the brilliant sun, you lived a fortunate life men envied, and Persians looked on you as on a god. And now I envy you, for you have died before you saw the depths of our misfortune. O Darius, you will hear everything. A few words tell it all—one might well say the Persian state is utterly destroyed.

DARIUS
How is this so? Has our country suffered from some foul pestilence or civil strife?

ATOSSA
No, not at all. But somewhere close to Athens all our forces have been overpowered.

DARIUS
What son of mine led our armies there? Speak.

ATOSSA
Impetuous Xerxes—he drained the men from our whole mainland plain.

DARIUS
That reckless wretch! Did he launch this foolish expedition by land or sea?

ATOSSA
By both. The double force proceeded on two fronts.

DARIUS
How could the men, a group of infantry that size, succeed in moving past the Hellespont?
ATOSSA

Xerxes
used a clever scheme to yoke the river
and forge a way across.

DARIUS

He managed this?
He closed the mighty Bosporus?¹

ATOSSA

He did.
Some spirit must have helped him with his plan.

DARIUS

Alas! Some mighty spirit came to him
and stopped him thinking clearly.

ATOSSA

Yes. And we can see the result of that,
the enormous ruin his actions caused.

DARIUS

Why do you grieve for them? What happened?

ATOSSA

The destruction of our naval forces
led to the slaughter of our men on land.

DARIUS

And so the entire army came to grief,
butchered by the spear?

ATOSSA

Yes. And that is why
all of Susa mourns—the entire city
laments its missing men.

DARIUS

Alas for the loss!
The help and defence of the army gone!

¹The Hellespont (now called the Dardanelles) and the Bosporus are the two straits which separate Asia from Europe in Asia Minor. For Aeschylus both names refer to the westernmost strait (i.e., the Hellespont). At its narrowest point, this strait is about half a mile across.
ATOSSA
All those troops from Bactria are now dead—
not even an old man remains.

DARIUS
O wretched Xerxes! So many allies!
He has killed off all our youth!

ATOSSA
The people say
he is now by himself, with few attendants.

DARIUS
How will this end? Do you have any hope
he could be rescued?

ATOSSA
There is some good news—
he reached the bridge that links two continents.

DARIUS
He returned to Asia safely? Is that true?

ATOSSA
It is. We have had news confirming it
beyond all doubt.

DARIUS
Alas! Those oracles have quickly been proved true, and Zeus has let
their full prophetic weight fall on my son.
I had hoped the gods would somehow hold off
fulfilling them for several years. But then,
when the man himself is in a hurry,
the god will take steps, too. It seems to me
a fountain of misfortunes has been found
for all the ones I love. It was my son
who, knowing nothing of these matters,
with his youthful rashness brought them on.
He wished to check the sacred Hellespont
by tying it down with chains, just like a slave,
and that holy river, too, the Bosporus.
He built a roadway never seen before,
enclosing it with hammered manacles, creating there a generous causeway for his enormous force. Though a mortal man, he sought to force his will on all the gods, a foolish scheme, even on Poseidon.¹

Why do that? Surely a sickness of the mind possessed my son? I fear that our great wealth, amassed by my hard work, may well become the spoils of anyone who marches here.

ATOSSA

Xerxes spent too much time with wicked men and learned to be impulsive. They told him how you had won great riches for your sons by fighting with your spear, while he, in fear, just used his spear at home and did not add to the wealth his father left. Gibes like this, which Xerxes often heard from evil men, led him to organize this expedition and launch an armed campaign against the Greeks.

DARIUS

And so he has achieved his mighty deed, the greatest of them all, truly immense, whose memory will never be erased—

he has removed from Susa all its citizens, something no man has ever done before, not since the time our sovereign Zeus proclaimed one man should have the honour of being king in all sheep-breeding Asia and should hold the sceptre of imperial command. Medos was the first to lead its armies, and then another man, his son, who had a spirit guided by intelligence, finished the work his father had begun.²

Third after him was Cyrus, a leader favoured by the gods, for his rule brought peace to all his friends. He added to his realm the Lydian and Phrygian people

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¹Poseidon, a brother of Zeus and Hades, was god of the sea.

²That is, he succeeded in bringing a large part of Asia under Persian rule. The Greek word Medos may not be a proper name but simply mean "a Mede."
and subdued all the Ionians by force.\textsuperscript{1} The god felt no hostility towards him, because his mind was wise. A son of Cyrus was the fourth in charge of Persia's armies, and Mardos was the fifth, a man who shamed his country and disgraced the ancient throne. But noble Artaphrenes with the help of comrades who undertook this duty hatched a scheme and did away with Mardos in his home. [Sixth in line was Maraphis, and seventh Artaphrenes]. When my turn came, I won the lot I wished for.\textsuperscript{2} Many times I led our mighty armies in campaigns, and yet I never brought such great disaster to our Persian state. But my son Xerxes, who is still young, has immature ideas and does not bear in mind what I advised. For you whose old age matches mine know well that none of us who have held ruling power was ever seen to cause such great distress.

CHORUS LEADER

But then, lord Darius, these words of yours—what do they imply? What do you conclude? After these events, what should we Persians do to serve this land the best way possible?

DARIUS

You must not organize armed expeditions against Hellenic lands, not even if the Persian force is larger than before. They have an ally—the very land itself.

CHORUS LEADER

What do you mean? In what way is the land their ally?

\textsuperscript{1}Lydia and Phrygia were areas in Asia Minor near the Mediterranean coast. The term Ionians here refers to the Greeks in Asia Minor and some adjacent islands. It does not include the Ionians elsewhere.

\textsuperscript{2}These lines refer to the traditional story that when the Persian nobles who conspired against Mardos succeeded, they drew lots to determine the imperial succession. In different accounts of this event, the names of the conspirators and the succeeding kings differ. Line 778 in the Greek is generally considered an interpolation (hence the square brackets).
DARIUS

Those armies which are very large
she kills with famine.

CHORUS LEADER

Then we will raise
some special soldiers and supply them well.

DARIUS

But that army which is still in Greece
will not get safely home.

CHORUS LEADER

What are you saying?
Will all our forces of barbarians
not make their way across the Hellespont
and out of Europe?

DARIUS

Not very many—
only a few of that huge multitude,
if, after those events we have been through,
we still place any trust in prophecies
the gods have made. For it is not the case
that some will be fulfilled and others not.
If the oracles are true, then Xerxes,
convinced by empty hopes, will leave behind
a specially chosen portion of his army,
now stationed where the river Asopus
waters the plains and brings Boeotian lands
sweet nourishment. This is the place those men
remain to undergo their punishment,
the very worst disaster of them all,
a payment for their pride and godless thoughts.
For when they first arrived in Greece, those men
did not display the slightest reverence
but broke in pieces images of gods
and burned their temples. They ravaged altars
demolished holy shrines, knocking them down
to their foundations, leaving scattered ruins.
And thus, given their acts were so profane,
the evils they must suffer are no less—
and others are in store. They have not plumbed
the depths of their disasters—more troubles
will keep flowing yet. The mix of blood and gore poured out by Dorian spears across the earth of Plataea will be so great the dead, the corpses heaped in piles, will still be there when three generations have come and gone, a silent witness to the eyes of men that mortal human beings should not believe that they are greater than they are.¹ For pride, when it grows ripe, produces as its fruit disastrous folly and a harvest crop of countless tears. So when you look upon the punishment for how these men behaved, remember Greece and Athens. Do not let any man despise the god he follows and, in his lust for something else, squander the great wealth he possesses. I tell you Zeus does act to chastise arrogant men whose thoughts are far too proud, and when he does his hand is heavy. So now that Xerxes has shown he lacks the prudence to think well, you must teach him with sensible advice to stop being so offensive to the gods through his presumptuous daring. As for you, dear lady, Xerxes’ venerable mother, return back to the palace. Pick out there some clothing fit for him, and then prepare to meet your son. His grief at his misfortune has torn to shreds the embroidered clothing covering his body. Use soothing words and gently calm him down, for I know this—yours is the only voice he listens to. As for me, I am returning to the earth, to darkness down below. Farewell, old men, despite these troubling times, you should each day discover reasons to rejoice, for riches bring no profit whatsoever to the dead.

[The Ghost of Darius disappears.]

CHORUS LEADER
To hear about the many troubles

¹Darius is here referring to the great land battle of Plataea, in Boeotia, where the Greek forces led by the Spartans, who were of Dorian descent, defeated the Persian land armies, after the naval battle of Salamis.
we barbarians must face, the ones
already here and still more yet to come,
fills me with grief.

ATOSSA

O god, I am overwhelmed
with so much bitter sorrow! But one thing
more than all the others gnaws my heart—
the disgraceful appearance of my son,
the shameful clothing covering his limbs.
But I will go and get appropriate robes
and try to find my son. In this distress,
I will not abandon those most dear to me.

[Atossa exits.]

CHORUS

Alas! How glorious and good the life
we loved here in our well-run city,
when our old sovereign ruled this land,
our all-sufficient and unconquered king,
who never brought us war or grief,
our mighty godlike Darius.

For first of all, we then displayed
our famous armies, and our traditions,
like towers of strength, ruled everything.
Our men returning from a war
faced no disasters—they reached
their prosperous homes unharmed.

Darius seized so many cities
and never crossed the Halys stream
or even left his home—places like
the Thracian Acheloan towns
beside the Strymonian sea.¹
And cities on the mainland, too,
far from the sea, well fortified
with walls encircling them
obeyed him as their king,

¹It is not entirely clear what places these phrases refer to, since the meaning of the Greek word *Acheloan* is disputed. The Halys River in Lydia, the longest river in Asia Minor, marked (for the Greeks) the western boundary of Persia.
and so did places on both shores
along the spacious Hellespont
and in the deep bays of Propontis
and where the Pontus flows into the sea.¹

And islands close to coastal headlands,
surrounded by the sea, right next to us,
like Lesbos, Samos, where olives grow,
and Chios, Paros, Naxos,
Mykonos, along with Andros, too,
adjacent to its neighbour Teos.

He ruled the wave-washed isles, as well,
which lie far out at sea—Lemnos,
the home of Icarus, and Rhodes,
with Cnidus, too, and Cyprian cities—
Paphos and Soli and Salamis,
whose mother state has caused
our present cries of anguish.²

And wealthy crowded cities of those Greeks
descended from Ionian stock
he ruled with his shrewd mind,
and under his command he had
enormous armies of warrior men—
all nations were allied with him.
But now we must endure defeats
in wars inflicted by the gods.
We cannot doubt the truth of this,
for we have been destroyed in war,
by massive disaster on the sea.

[Enter Xerxes.]

XERXES
O my situation now is desperate!
My luck has led me to a cruel fate

¹The Propontis (now called the Sea of Marmora) is a large body of water between the Bosporus and the Hellespont. Pontus was normally the name of a region on the south shores of the Black Sea. Here is seems to apply to a river or rivers in the area.

²Icarus, son of Daedalus, attempted to fly away from Crete on wings his father, Daedalus, had made. But when he flew too near the sun, the wax holding his feathers melted, and he fell into the sea and drowned. The Icarian Sea in the eastern Mediterranean was named after him.
which I did not foresee! How savagely
a demon trampled on the Persian race. 1080
What must I still endure in this distress?
As I look on these ancient citizens,
the strength in my limbs fails. O how I wish
a fatal doom from Zeus had buried me
with all those men who perished!

CHORUS LEADER

Alas, my king,
for our brave force and the mighty honour
of Persia’s influence, those splendid men [920]
whom fate has now cut down. The earth laments
her native youth, the soldiers Xerxes killed,
who filled all Hades with the Persian dead. 1090
So many men—our country’s flowers—slain,
thousands perishing from enemy bows,
a close-packed multitude, all dead and gone.¹
Alas! Alas, for all our brave protectors!
O sovereign of the earth, all Asian lands
are now upon their knees, a dreadful sight,
so dreadful. . . .

XERXES

You see me here, alas, a sad
and useless wretch who has become
an evil presence for my race
and for my native land. 1100

CHORUS

For your return I will send out
in these harsh-sounding tones
a cry of ominous grief,
one full of tears, a shout
of Mariandynian sorrow.² [940]

XERXES

Then let your sad lament resound,
a harsh and plaintive cry.
For the god has turned against me.

¹Here the Chorus describes the Greeks as fighting with bows. Earlier in the play there has been a distinction
between the Persians, who fight with bows, and the Greeks, who fight with spears.
²The Mariandynians were a Thracian people, famous for their funeral laments.
CHORUS
   Yes, I will sing my tearful chant
to honour the men who suffered so
in that defeat at sea—a dirge
from those who mourn this land
and lament its slaughtered sons.
My doleful grief I voice once more.

XERXES
   Ionian Ares with those ships of war
turned the tide of victory
and swept our troops away—
the Greek fleet razed the murky sea
and that fatal cliff onshore.'

CHORUS
   Aaaaiii! Cry out your sorrows,
and learn the tale in full.
Where are they now, that multitude
of other friends so dear to us?
Where are the ones who stood by you—
Pharandaces, and Sousas, and Pelagon,
with Agabatas and Dotamas,
Psammis, and Sousiskanes,
who came from Agbatana?

XERXES
   I left them there. They perished,
tumbling out of their Tyrian ship
by the coast of Salamis,
beaten against its rugged shore.

CHORUS
   Aaaaiii! Where is Pharnouchus, your friend,
and Ariomardus, that glorious man?
And lord Seualcus or Lilaios,
descended from a noble line,
or Memphis, Tharybis, and Masistras,
or Hystaichmas and Artembares?
I am asking you about them, too.

'This is a reference to the destruction of the Persians on Psyttaleia (see line 516 above).
XERXES
Alas! Alas! They caught a glimpse
of ancient Athens, that hateful place!
Now all of them at one fell blow—
the pain of those poor wretches—
lie gasping on the shore.

CHORUS
And did you really leave behind
Alpistos, son of Batanochus,
your ever-loyal Persian eye
who tracked men by the thousands?
The sons of Sesames and Megabates,
with Parthos and the great Oibares—
did you abandon them, as well,
and leave them with the others?
Alas, alas, for those poor men!
You talk of catastrophic woes
among our noble Persians.

XERXES
What you say truly makes me yearn
for all my fine companions,
when you bring up the evil times,
that hateful woe I cannot bear.
From deep within, my grieving heart
howls out my pain and sorrow.

CHORUS
But there are other men we miss—
like Xanthes, who as commander
captained countless Mardian men,
as well as warlike Anchares,
and Diaixis, too, and Arsakes,
who led the cavalry,
and Agdadas, Lythimnas,
and Tolmus, too, whose appetite
could never get enough of war.
I am amazed they are not here

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1The “eyes” of the Persian king were officials whose task was to keep him informed about what was going on among the king’s subjects. Some portion of the text is evidently missing after line 981 in the Greek.
marching behind you in your train
with your wheel-drawn carriage tent.

XERXES
Those leaders of our forces are all dead.

CHORUS
They are gone? Alas! And with no glory!

XERXES
Aaaaiiii! The sorrow!

CHORUS
Alas! Alas, you spirits above,
you bring us such disaster,
so unforeseen and yet so clear to see,
as if the goddess of folly, Ate,
had glanced at us in this calamity.¹

XERXES
We have been hit by blows,
smitten by unexpected blows of fate!

CHORUS
Yes, all too clearly stricken!

XERXES
New troubles, strange disasters! [1010]

CHORUS
It was bad luck for us we ran into
those ships and sailors from Ionia.
The Persian race, as we can see,
has had no luck in war. 1190

XERXES
How can that be? Such a mighty force!
And I, a miserable wretch,
have now been beaten down!

¹Ate, the goddess of folly, caused people temporarily to lose all their judgment, so that they made decisions with disastrous consequences.
PERSIANS

CHORUS
    And of our splendid Persian glory
    what has not perished?

XERXES
    Do you see my robes—
    what’s left of them?

CHORUS
    Yes, I see . . . I see them now.

XERXES
    And my quiver here . . .

[1020]

CHORUS
    What are you saying?
    Is this what has been saved?

XERXES
    . . . this holder for my arrows?

CHORUS
    So small a remnant from so many!

XERXES
    We have lost all our protectors!

[1200]

CHORUS
    Ionian troops are not afraid to fight.

XERXES
    They are a warlike race. I witnessed there
    what I did not expect—a great defeat.

CHORUS
    You mean the way they beat your warships—
    that massive fleet?

XERXES
    When that disaster came,
    I ripped my clothing.

CHORUS
    Alas! Alas!

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XERXES
   And there were even more catastrophes
to make one cry “Alas!”

CHORUS
   Two and three times more!

XERXES
   Crushing grief—but for our enemies great joy!

CHORUS
   Our strength has been lopped off.

XERXES
   I am now naked—stripped of my attendants!

CHORUS
   By deaths of friends who perished on the sea.

XERXES
   Weep for that catastrophe! Let your tears fall.
   Then return back to your homes.

CHORUS
   Alas, such grief!
   Alas, for our distress!

XERXES
   Your cries of sorrow—
   let them echo mine!

CHORUS
   An answering cry of anguished pain
   from one grief to another.

XERXES
   Cry out and link together our laments!

CHORUS
   Aaaaiii! Misfortunes hard to bear!
   For I too share your grief!
XERXES
For my sake beat your chests and groan!

CHORUS
My sorrow drenches me with tears!

XERXES
Shout out your cries to answer mine.

CHORUS
We will respond to you, my king.

XERXES
Now raise your voices high in your laments. [1050]

CHORUS
Aaaaaiiiii! Once more
we mix our song of grief
with these dark blows of pain!

XERXES
Now beat your chests and as you do 1230
howl out a Mysian strain!\(^n\)

CHORUS
Such grief! Such sorrow!

XERXES
And tear those white hairs on your chin!

CHORUS
With fists I clench my beard and moan!

XERXES
Let your shrill cries ring out!

CHORUS
I will cry out!

XERXES
And with your fingers rip your flowing robes! [1060]

\(^n\)The Mysians, who lived in northern Asia Minor, were famous for their mourning laments.
CHORUS
   The pain! The sorrow!

XERXES
   Now tug your hair out as you cry
   for our lost army!

CHORUS
   With these fists
      I clench my hair and moan!

XERXES
   Let your eyes fill with tears.

CHORUS
   They do! They do!

XERXES
   Shout out your cries to answer mine.

CHORUS
   Alas! Alas! 1240

XERXES
   And now, as you lament, go home.

CHORUS
   Alas! Alas! Such grief to move
   across our Persian land.  [1070]

XERXES
   Such grief throughout the city.

CHORUS
   So much pain, so much distress!

XERXES
   Tread softly as you wail your grief.

CHORUS
   Alas! Alas! Such grief to move
   across our Persian land.
XERXES
   Aaaaaii! Alas, for those destroyed
   in the flat bottomed boats—
   the power of those three-tiered galleys!

CHORUS
   I will be your escort and attend on you
   with mournful cries of sorrow.

[Xerxes and the Chorus exit.]