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A Democratic Consideration of Herodotus's *Histories*

Mary Jo Davies

In the *Histories*, Herodotus's admiration of Athenian Democracy is apparent when he compares a strong, democratic Athens in the fifth century BC to monarchies and tyrannies. Compelled to satisfy the needs or decisions of kings and tyrants, Persian soldiers became compulsory participants, which often transmuted into disasters on the battlefield. On the contrary, Athenian democracy's anti-aristocratic arrangement promoted cooperative decision-making for the interest of the community. This freedom encouraged soldiers to become willing participants in warfare. Although victory was not always in their hands, to Herodotus, fighting for the collective interest of a community rather than for the narcissistic pursuit of one leader fostered an unwavering commitment to the cause. Inspired by Athenian ways of expressing egalitarian values, Herodotus's intention for writing the *Histories* was not to give Greece a sense of its historical identity, but to endorse the advantages of democratic rule over tyranny. This paper will prove that Herodotus's purpose for writing the *Histories* was to promote democracy.

Historiography and Sources

In her article, "Athenian Democratic Ideology and Herodotus' *Histories*" Sara Forsdyke proposed a new evaluation of Herodotus's *Histories* by establishing a thematic connection between tyranny and civic weakness versus democratic freedom and civic strength. Drawing on a substantial amount of primary source literature, Forsdyke concluded that each character and event represents a reflection of democratic principles. This offers a valuable starting point to analyze further Herodotus's *Histories* as propaganda for endorsing democracy.

Herodotus is recognized as the first Western historian. There is no prior written evidence to contradict him or his methodology. Hence, his propensity for exaggerating and even creating some of the events he chronicled.¹ As a consequence, reliability for historical military accuracy becomes sketchy at best. Historians Everett Wheeler and Barry Strauss also recognized Herodotus's limitations when they state that Herodotus "puts [words] in Mardonius's mouth."² In "Can We Trust the Ancient Texts," Richard A. Gabriel analyzes the propensity for ancient Greek and Roman historians, such as Herodotus and Livy, to fabricate evidence. They were less concerned with conveying truthful accounts than they were with teaching moral lessons.³ In light of this, it is plausible to surmise that

Herodotus's underlying intention for writing the *Histories* was to endorse the advantages of democratic rule over tyranny.

Democracy in ancient Athens cannot be compared to modern standards of social equity. It was not as inclusive as contemporary democracies. Most people in ancient Athens, including women, slaves, foreigners, and the very poor, had few civil rights and civil liberties. The adult male citizens of modest to wealthy standing were the only class that retained extraordinary control over the city's political affairs. Despite this social inequity, it was from this perspective that Herodotus trusted democracy's ability to foster communal strength and intelligence. He believed it to be the most powerful medium for uniting all of Greece against future threats. Indeed, Herodotus was the first person to use the unifying term *Hellas* to define all people living in the Greek-speaking world. Motivated by Athenian ways of expressing political ideals, it is easy to suppose that Herodotus breathed new life into the various historical personages to befit his admiration of democracy.

Background

Herodotus was born in Halicarnassus, a Greek city located on the western coast of modern-day Turkey. Based on bits of evidence scattered throughout his writings, it is possible to determine that he was born around the year 485 BC. The Greco-Persian wars he wrote about took place within a fifty-year period beginning fourteen years prior to his determined birth. Consequently, it is necessary to assume that stories of the earlier years of the war were based on accounts that were handed down to him by his elders. Herodotus also did not participate in any war. That he lacked the advantage of eyewitness evidence further justifies the case for embellishment.

A Democratic Agenda

Whether or not the speeches or conversations recorded in the *Histories* are historically accurate is, as discussed above, questionable. However, since Herodotus was using those stories to promote democracy, they may very well represent a juxtaposition between freedom and tyranny. For example, in his quest to punish the Athenians for past aggressions, Persian king Xerxes demanded complete commitment from his troops. To that end he ordered, "When I tell you that it's time to come, you must all rush to come."⁴ However, retrospective, word-for-word dialogues are not possible to recount, especially when, like Herodotus, one is not present at the event. Lacking the verification to prove that Xerxes

actually said this, one can easily make the leap and presume that Herodotus's intent was to highlight Persian civic weakness.⁵

Herodotus did not limit his fabrications to conversations and speeches. To further promote democracy, he also exaggerated the number of enemy soldiers and military fatalities. When Persian military commander Mardonius says that he does not believe the Greeks “will learn how far beyond other men we are in the skills of war,”⁶ Herodotus is setting the reader up for an ironic twist of military success. The Greek army, significantly smaller, defeated the Persians at the battle of Salamis in 480 BC. Although all Greeks at Salamis fought as one Panhellenic army, victory according to Herodotus belonged to the Athenians. The Athenians were the ones who rallied all the Greeks in the Hellenic world to fight against the Persians. Hence, what seems like straightforward chronicling of military history can easily become a reflection of a political and cultural approach to understanding warfare. According to Herodotus, Athenian democracy promoted the willingness to fight for the preservation of freedom, where men fought for their own interests rather than the interest of a single ruler.⁷ On the contrary, the Persian soldiers fought under penalty of execution. Indeed, the very word “freedom,” its equivalents and any concept associated with liberty did not exist in ancient Persia. Democracy's freedom and the unifying strength fostered by it could have been the very things that Herodotus hoped would inspire non-democratic Greek societies to convert and become one cohesive empire. For the time being however, while all Greeks at Salamis fought for the preservation of their freedom from Persian control, Athenians (and any other city-state ruled by democracy) lived that political freedom off the battlefield, in their daily lives.

Sparta was still a monarchy. Although they had evolved into an outstanding warrior race, they stubbornly resisted the cultural innovations that characterized Athens. With a small population and a stagnant economy, their primary aim was to bolster their size, stabilize their wealth, and create an efficient army through rigorous military training. To that end, they made allies of many of their neighbors. Subsequently, they enslaved the Messenians to work in the fields and confiscated their wealth to bolster their economy.⁸ But to Herodotus, Sparta lacked the cooperative intelligence as fostered by a democracy. Though Sparta's participation at the battle of Salamis provided the necessary courage for Greek triumph, without Athens's rallying spirit of democracy, Herodotus believed that Sparta's allies would have left them to stand alone against their enemy.⁹ Thus it does not matter how much larger the Persian army was than the Greek army (the numbers are surely exaggerated), or if the Salamis account is even historically accurate. The battle of Salamis, as told by Herodotus, reveals the value of a

democratic culture, which he believed was the only way to unite all of Greece against the enemy.

At times, it was enough for Herodotus to describe the cause for the limitations of a monarchy to prove his point. The interview between Lydian King Croesus and Solon of Athens provides an ideal example. Though Solon was a tyrant who ruled in 560 BC prior to the establishment of democracy, his reign included the founding of new laws, which would eventually serve as a model for Athenian democracy.¹⁰ Thus, the philosophical conversation between Solon and Croesus highlighted the Athenian leader's intellectual disposition versus the pompous nature of the Lydian king who considered his own happiness and good fortune worthy of honor. Presented as the wise Athenian, Solon understood how fickle fortune was and refused to honor the Lydian king with the title of "happy." According to Solon, only men who retain all the blessings of life until the end of their lives deserved to be honored with that title.¹¹

Equally revealing is the story of imperial corruption. To demonstrate his point, Herodotus highlighted the depravity of Spartan kings Cleomenes and Leotychides. Sparta traditionally had two kings. Cleomenes's hostility toward his co-regent, Demaratus, would eventually play a major role in his own demise. Yet, tension also existed between Demaratus and his cousin Leotychides, who aspired to the throne. Reviving an old rumor that Demaratus was the illegitimate son of King Ariston, Cleomenes and Leotychides both conspired and succeeded in forcing Demaratus out. Thus, in the fifth century BC, Leotychides became co-regent of Sparta alongside Cleomenes. Although Demaratus's mother told her son that he was in actual fact the legitimate son of his father and rightful heir to the throne, he was compelled to flee the country. Historically branded a turncoat, he joined Xerxes to fight against his own people. Eventually Leotychides was exposed for bribery and banished from his kingdom. He escaped to Tegea where he eventually died.¹² Cleomenes, who in his conspiracy had forced the Delphic oracle to lie in favor of Leotychides, was now in fear for his own life. He fled Sparta with the Lacedaemonians on his tail and later died a gruesome death by self-mutilation to avoid punishment. It is no accident that Herodotus praised Athenian democracy immediately before this vivid account of imperial treachery.¹³

Whether or not these stories are factual is irrelevant; the underlying motive for including them in his accounts reveals what Herodotus believed could never happen in a democratic society. In the process, he gave his audience a glimpse of everything that was negative of life under a monarchy, where pompous kings believed they were worthy of veneration and where corrupt kings took the throne by way of deceit and died in disgrace. Moreover, unaccustomed to

exercising their intellect, or simply uninformed, the people living under a monarch more readily blamed the death of their ruler on punishment from the gods or excessive drink. They were not freely disposed to consider the failings of monarchies and tyrannies or the advantages of democracies. It is clear that Herodotus was aware of the struggle that was building between democratic Athens and oligarchic Sparta. This tension would eventually lead to the Peloponnesian war in 431 BC and turn the tides in Spartan favor with devastating consequences for Athens. Perhaps in foreseeing this, Herodotus hoped, through his writings, to prevent it.¹⁴

Herodotus on Women

Although women in Athens were not participatory citizens, they were, nevertheless, a complimentary part of the whole. Athenian democracy was fashioned not just by men, but by women through men. Women needed to be respectable representatives of Athenian democracy in accordance with their status, but to better understand Herodotus's treatment of women in the *Histories*, it is necessary to become acquainted with the condition of women in classical Athenian society.

An Athenian woman's intelligence was not based on her own inherent acumen. Fifth century historian Xenophon discusses proper Athenian female etiquette at length in the *Economics*. In it, the principle character Ischomachus speaks with admiration of his wife's intelligence, but he is not referring to her level of competence nor is he commenting on her breadth of worldly knowledge. He is revealing her astute ability to obey and learn and by consequence, he is boasting of his own ability to teach.¹⁵

This type of patriarchal reality was pervasive even in comedy. Fifth century BC comic playwright Aristophanes repeatedly placed his female characters where Athenian democratic society forbade them to be — outdoors. Acting in a manner that countered acceptable behavior, they undertook and accomplished things they would never have been able to accomplish in real life. In *Ecclesiazusae*, women disguised themselves as men to attend the assembly and demand that women should run the country. It might be tempting to believe that Aristophanes was giving women in the real world the incentive to rise up to the occasion. After all, women did win the right to rule the country in his play. However, in antiquity men performed the role of women on stage. Indeed, in *Ecclesiazusae*, men played women dressed as men. Equally revealing is the fact that Aristophanes allowed women to win the right to rule the country by men who,

in turn, agreed to surrender their role in the belief that the ones who proposed the idea were men. The demands and accomplishments of the women in *Ecclesiazusae* are actually what make the story comical. They are, according to Athenian democratic standards, illogical and silly. As Xenophon said, their intelligence was not measured by their level of worldly knowledge, but by their ability to obey men. Hence, classical Athenian reality would have deemed it unthinkable to consider women in positions of political leadership. They were not intellectually competent enough to do so. This might cause one to question the purpose of Aristophanes's play. More to the point, it forces one to wonder why he chose to portray Athenian democratic men as bumbling, gullible fools. They did, in the end, relinquish their role as assemblymen to the women. Herein lies the correlation between literature and reality that reveals the true role of women in ancient Athens. In *Ecclesiazusae*, Chremes speaks of one of the men at the assembly who demanded that women should run the country. Unaware that the man was actually a woman in disguise he says, "He maintained that women were both clever and thrifty, that they never divulged the Mysteries of Demeter, while you and I go about babbling incessantly about whatever happens at the Senate."¹⁶

In this passage, Aristophanes was not implying that women in the real world were more intelligent and therefore should run the country. Rather, an honorable Athenian woman remained indoors where she learned to be both clever and thrifty in managing the household. Wives were responsible for stocking fruits, grains, vegetables and raw wool for eventual utilization and consumption. Their efficiency and reliability left men free to take care of affairs in the field and at the assembly.¹⁷ By placing women in the public sphere, Aristophanes exploited their socially and politically incompetent status to describe the state of his country at the hands of incompetent men. Thus, the above passage reads more like a veiled historiographical reference to the condition of the senate in the real world.

While, on first pass, Herodotus's accounts might seem as if he were trying to redeem a woman's position in society, most of the cunning females he wrote about were not even Athenian. For example, when Lydian king Candaules tried to prove to his chief adviser, Gyges, that his wife was the most beautiful, he paid the ultimate price. After discovering that her husband had arranged to have Gyges secretly view her while she undressed, she conspired with Gyges, to murder her husband, the king. At the appointed moment, Gyges killed the hapless king and seized both queen and kingdom for himself.¹⁸ This account underscores how Athenian men ought not to behave. Under a monarchy, women, unrestrained by men, became more devious than Aristophanes's heroines, while kings acted more foolishly than the playwright's male characters. Athenian democracy expected

women to be controlled by men and men to be more effective leaders than autocratic monarchs. The freedoms men enjoyed under a democracy allowed them to collectively make sound decisions that would strengthen their administration and maintain their liberty. To Herodotus, it made no sense not to exercise their civil liberties. The Athenians knew all too well the price they had to pay for not employing their intellect. Phye is the only woman to appear in an Athenian setting in Herodotus's *Histories*. Represented as a tall beauty, she was paraded about by the tyrant Peisistratus, dressed in such a way as to appear to be the goddess Athene herself. By not exercising sound judgment, the people instantly fell for Peisistratus's scam.¹⁹ The result, of course, was that the Athenians were naïve enough to make him their leader and subsequently paid the price of tyrannical rule. Although much of Peisistratus's reign in the sixth century BC was relatively benign and successful, tyrants typically established their rule by unlawful force. Hence, the community did not benefit from the collective, intellectual decision-making process of a democratic assembly, which is what Herodotus highly valued.²⁰

Herodotus and Religion

Identifying Herodotus's democratic interests in the *Histories* require close examination. They are not explicitly apparent, but they were no doubt inspired by the growing intellectual ferment of philosophical thought that was spreading in the Greek world in the fifth century BC. Yet it is also clear that Herodotus did not overtly express agnosticism, which in his lifetime might have carried a penalty of execution. It is necessary to keep in mind that the concept of freedom at this time was still relatively new. The canopy that protected freedom of ideas was still quite small and inequitable by today's standards. The freedom of religious expression may have been a part of its evolving process. Perhaps, to avoid trouble for spreading impious ideas, the presence of the gods in Herodotus's writings was still quite notable. Since we know little about his religious convictions, one can presume he safely moderated the growing belief that men were the authors of their own fate by attributing certain outcomes to divine forces.²¹ Such was the story of Xerxes's and Artabanus's dreams regarding the invasion of Greece. Artabanus's psychological explanation of the dreams altered when he admitted to having been visited by the gods. As long as the moral of the story favored the role of the gods, Herodotus was safe. His readers, nonetheless, gained the benefit of considering the veiled pragmatic solutions to life as promoted by democracy.

Conclusion

By the time Herodotus wrote and published the *Histories* most of the events of which he spoke had already taken place. While he is not known to have had any military experience, it is important to keep in mind that military participation did not guarantee historical accuracy. For example, Greco-Roman historian Polybius, who had an active career in politics and even fought in the Achaean war, had forged a lifelong friendship with the Roman General Scipio Aemilianus during his sixteen-year detention in Rome. Because of this, one must consider the possibility of a hidden Roman agenda, which, in this case, was undoubtedly meant to dissuade Greek opposition to Rome.²²

Since Herodotus is the first in an ancient line of historians to come out of Europe, the discipline of history, as shaped by him, was rudimentary insofar as research and methodology, which explains why his writings read more like a novel than a historical military account. Despite the difficulties related to the plausibility of ancient writing, Herodotus's accounts remain the most complete retelling of the Greco-Persian wars. It stands as a matter of personal discretion whether it is reasonable to assume that his accounts were not so much a record of military history as they were propaganda for democracy, modeled on that of Athens, and intended to benefit Greek culture as a whole.

Notes

1. Herodotus, "Histories" in *Herodotus, On the War for Greek Freedom: Selections from the Histories*, trans. Samuel Shirley, ed. James Romm (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2001), viii.

2. Everett L. Wheeler and Barry Strauss, "Battle," in *The Cambridge History of Greek and Roman Warfare*, eds. Philip Sabin, Hans van Wees, and Michael Whitby (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 190.

3. Richard A. Gabriel, "Can We Trust the Ancient Texts?" *Military History* 25.1 (2008): 63.

4. Herodotus, 121.

5. Sara Forsdyke, "Athenian Democratic Ideology and Herodotus' "Histories," *American Journal of Philology* 122.3 (2001): 334.

6. Herodotus, 122.

7. Forsdyke, 348.

8. Herodotus, xiii.

9. Ibid. 137.

10. Christopher W. Blackwell, "The Development of Athenian Democracy," in Adriaan Lanni, ed., "Athenian Law in its Democratic Context" (*Center for Hellenic Studies On-line Discussion*

Series). Republished in C.W. Blackwell, ed., *Dēmos: Classical Athenian Democracy* (A. Mahoney and R. Scaife, ed., *The Stoa: a consortium for electronic publication in the humanities* [www.stoa.org]) edition of January 24, 2003.: 3, accessed November 6, 2015. http://www.stoa.org/projects/demos/article_democracy_development?page=3&greekEncoding=UnicodeC.

11. Herodotus, 11.

12. Ibid, 104.

13. Ibid, 94.

14. Ibid, xvi.

15. Xenophon, *Economics* 10.1; The Perseus Catalog, accessed, April 4, 2015, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0212%3Atext%3DEc.%3Achapter%3D7%3Asection%3D22>.

16. Aristophanes, *Ecclesiazusae* 121; The Perseus Catalog, accessed, March 12, 2015, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0030%3Acard%3D41442-444>.

17. Sarah B. Pomeroy, Stanley M. Burstein, Walter Donlan, and Jennifer Tolbert Robert, *Ancient Greece: A Political, Social and Cultural History*, 3d ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 265.

18. Herodotus, 6.

19. Emily Katz Anhalt, "Seeing is Believing: Four Women on Display in Herodotus' *Histories*," *New England Classical Journal* 35, no. 4 (2008): 271.

20. Blackwell, n.p. http://www.stoa.org/projects/demos/article_democracy_development?page=3&greekEncoding=UnicodeC.

21. Herodotus, xvii.

22. Wheeler, 191.

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