

Herodotus, Politics and Athenian Democracy

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As is widely accepted by scholars, much of the Western philosophies have roots in ancient Greece. Among the most influential ancient Greek figures is the “Father of History,” Herodotus of Halicarnassus, who chronicled the history of the Persian Wars. Herodotus used the *Histories* as a medium for discussing the political trends of his time, specifically those in Athens. Herodotus shared his views on the foundation of Greek democracy, comparing and contrasting democracy and monarchy and portraying the Athenian democratic form as the exemplary form of government. In addition, Herodotus warned that Athens would fall victim to the very same faults which had allowed it to come to power. In this article, I argue that Herodotus can be characterized not only as the “Father of History,” but also as the “Father of Propaganda.”

While there are many other forms of government – even democratic forms of government – none so closely resembles our own modern system. The Greek model of government served as a basis for the United States and other Western nations.¹

For students of history, Herodotus’ *Histories* (c. 450-420 B.C.) is one of the most important sources of information on Athenian political ideology. Throughout his work, Herodotus alludes to the political atmosphere and events of his own time, connecting them to those during the Persian Wars, and offering his own judgments and critiques. Because of this, the *Histories* should be viewed as more than just a historical narrative or even a catalogue of events and cultures, but as an academic work in dialogue with the political thinkers of Herodotus’ own time. As Kurt Raaflaub notes, “Herodotus drew on a large pool of political ideas that were shared by and developed in interaction among many intellectuals throughout the Greek world” (2002, 178-19).

By directly and, at times, subversively, passing judgment on the politics of his day, Herodotus can be said to have been engaging in an exercise of political propaganda. Though the term “propaganda” carries negative connotations in today’s society, the practice goes back to ancient times and has both positive and negative aspects.² Herodotus was writing at a pivotal time in Greek history and his ideas helped shape the way his contemporaries viewed politics.

Herodotus and Government

Herodotus identifies two main forms of government: a democracy such as Athens, and a monarchy/tyranny such as Persia.³ Each of these forms of government appears multiple times throughout the *Histories*, sometimes in a positive light, other times in a negative light. Because of this, there is considerable debate on Herodotus’ political views and what, if anything, he was attempting to convey to his 5th century Greek audience. For Herodotus, it was not the Athenian constitution or democratic values that made freedom, but the absence of tyranny and inequality

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¹ It is, of course, correct that the ancient Greek system is very different from the one Western states use today. Yes, the United States is not at all a direct democracy and many influential political philosophers have criticized the ancient Greek system. However, I would argue that the base foundation of democracy is to be found in ancient Greece. Without the Greek democracy, there would be no Roman republic, then no spreading of cultures throughout Europe, and our own systems would not have their primitive foundations. Machiavelli would not have been able to write his *Prince* or his *Discourses on Livy*. So, while it is correct that our own system draws more from other, non-Greek sources, those sources themselves can trace their origins back to Western Greek democracy.

² Oxford English Dictionary, def. 3.

³ Note that the word “tyranny” had negative connotations for Herodotus.

(Saxenhouse 1996, 45). For example, Herodotus considered Sparta as free, despite the fact that it was undemocratic, lacked a constitution and was the most closely regulated of the Greek city-states.

For Herodotus, equality was the most important characteristic of democracy and the foundation for good government. In a democracy, all men are (theoretically) equal and there is no single ruler who is above the population. In a tyranny, on the other hand, one person is placed unequally above others and is not held accountable for his actions. In 5.92 of *Histories*, Herodotus has his character Socles state that abolishing a democracy in order to establish a tyranny is like turning the earth upside down (Saxenhouse 1996, 34). For Herodotus, instituting an unequal government by ruining an equal one is contrary to the natural order.

Herodotus bolsters his argument for a tyrannical system by calling attention to the faults of democracy. For example, Herodotus does not portray the Athenian tyrant Peisistratos as corrupt or harsh in any way. In fact, Herodotus describes Peisistratos' tyrannical rule in benign terms, noting that "Peisistratos ruled the Athenians, disturbing in no way the order of offices nor changing the laws, but governing the city according to its established constitution and arranging all things fairly and well" (Herodotus 1.59.6).⁴ Although the Athenians were said to be oppressed, Peisistratos was not portrayed as a cruel tyrant who ravaged the people for his own greed, but merely a person who felt himself entitled to power. This description of Peisistratos rule suggests that Herodotus did not consider tyranny to be an absolute evil.

Although Herodotus never blatantly disregards tyranny as a political system, he also straightforwardly acknowledges the limitations and defects of tyrannical forms of government. In the Peisistratos passage, for example, Herodotus describes the Athenians as "held down" (Herodotus 1.59.1).⁵ This choice of words implies that the people were not free and carries a negative connotation as it was used in Herodotus' time to describe an overthrown tyranny (Forsdyke 2001, 332). Herodotus also tells of a conversation between the Persian emperor Xerxes and Demaratus, an exiled Spartan king, on the eve of Xerxes invasion of Greece. Xerxes rhetorically asks if the Greeks will stay to fight an army as great as his, to which Demaratus timidly asks if the king would like a truthful response or a response pleasing to him. Xerxes grants him permission to speak freely, but even then Demaratus is fearful to speak his mind to the ruler. As Forsdyke explains, freedom of speech (παρρησία) was a central tenet of the political theory of freedom held by every Greek, while fear of speaking one's mind was a characteristic of a despotic tyranny (2001, 333). In this instance, Demaratus, once a Greek king with full powers of speech and freedom, left his native Greece and fled to the barbarians, where he lost his freedom. Demaratus' degraded condition illustrated to Herodotus' audience the stark contrast between the lives of free Greeks and enslaved Persian civilians.

As for democracy, there is considerable evidence in praise of it. In a speech from the famous Persian political debate that was described by Herodotus in *Histories* 3.80-82, Otanes states that "rule by the majority" is favorable because it has the most beautiful name, ἰσονομία, or equality of rights. In this, Otanes was supporting the Herodotean concept of equality as a foundation for a good society. In addition, Otanes also notes that democratic rule does not share any of the malice of a tyranny. In a democracy, one man is not put above the rest, and every ruler is held accountable for his actions. According to Herodotus, even the best of men, when presented with the power of a tyrant, will stray from his morals and become corrupt. However, in a democracy, no one man has absolute rule, so there is no corruption or avoidance of the law.

⁴ This quote was translated from the original Greek, which read as follows: "ἐνθα δὴ Πεισίστρατος ἦρχε Ἀθηναίων, τιμὰς τὰς ἐούσας συνταράξας οὔτε θέσμια μεταλλάξας, ἐπὶ τε τοῖσι κατεστεῶσι ἔνεμε τὴν πόλιν κοσμέων καλῶς τε καὶ εὖ."

⁵ "Held down" was translated from the original Greek: "κατεχόμενόν."

Although Herodotus did not articulate a theoretical argument against democracy, he did provide examples of democratic failures. In the Persian political debate passage, both Darius and Megabixos point out that the mob does not have the wisdom to rule, which makes democracy a dangerous proposition. The challenges facing a democracy are also evident in the story of Maeandrius (*Histories* 3.142). After assuming control of Samos following a period of tyranny, Maeandrius established a democracy to rule the city in a just manner. The democracy was short-lived, however, after Maeandrius became enraged at members of the counsel who opposed his request to assume a very small part of the previous leader's estate. Maeandrius accused council members of greed and slander and reinstated himself as a tyrant. In this story, Herodotus demonstrated that democracy – though preferable to tyranny – was difficult to implement.

To some extent, Herodotus' opposition to tyranny is deduced from the fact that no Greek state lasted long in tyranny. As for favoring democracy, scholars cite Herodotus' praise of a democratic system, in which he stated:

Equality is a good thing. Evidence for this is the fact that while they were under tyrannical rulers, the Athenians were no better in war than any of their neighbors, yet once they got rid of their tyrants, they were by far the best of all. This, then, shows that while they were oppressed, they were, as men working for a master, cowardly, but when they were freed, each one was eager to achieve for himself. (Herodotus 5.78)

In this passage, Herodotus provides clear evidence of his favorable views toward democratic forms of government.

Athenian Democratic Ideology

In addition to discussing the advantages and disadvantages of tyrannical and democratic forms of government, Herodotus' *Histories* also details the fundamental elements of Athenian democratic ideology. In this, he focuses specifically on the fact that tyrannies are fundamentally weak, while societies ruled by democratic ideals are considerably stronger. Returning to the phrase “held down” in the Peisistratos passage, Forsdyke contends that Herodotus gives the impression that the Athenians were oppressed and divided into factions under Peisistratos' rule, which suggests that tyranny leaves the state in a weakened condition (Forsdyke 2001, 333).⁶

The weakness of tyrannical systems is also seen in Demaratus' words to Xerxes. When asked whether the Greeks would even stay and fight, Demaratus expresses his disagreement with Xerxes' accusation, saying:

In Hellas poverty is always endemic, but courage is acquired as the fruit of wisdom and strong law; by use of this courage Hellas defends herself from poverty and tyranny. (Herodotus 7.102.1)

Thus, freedom is considered to be the root of strength, while weakness is the result of tyranny. According to Demaratus, the Greeks found excellence (ἀρετή) through wisdom (σοφία) and strong law (νόμος ἰσχυρός), which were nurtured through democracy in action. It is these traditions and values, Demaratus says, that makes it possible for a small force of Greeks to defeat the substantially larger army led by Xerxes.

⁶ The passage starts, “τό μὲν Ἀττικὸν καταχόμενον τε καὶ διεσπασμένον...ὑπὸ Πεισιστράτου τοῦ Ἴπποκράτους;” “the Attic was held in subjection and divided into factions by Pisistratus, son of Hippocrates” (*Histories* 1.59.1)

In book five, Herodotus elaborates on the power of democracy in his description of the Spartan motives in trying to replace the Peisistratid dynasty:

Now the Lacedaemonians, when they regained the oracles and saw the Athenians increasing in power and in no way inclined to obey them, realized that if the Athenians remained free, they would be equal in power with themselves, but that if they were held down under tyranny, they would be weak and ready to serve a master. Perceiving all this, they sent to bring Pisistratus' son Hippias from Sigeum on the Hellespont, the Pisistratidae's place of refuge. (5.59.1)

The Spartans feared that the Athenians would become powerful enough to rival and, eventually, overtake the Spartans; in order to prevent this from happening, they moved to reinstate tyranny and make the Athenians weak again. In this account, Herodotus again draws on the belief that tyranny results in weakness while democratic freedom results in strength and power. Forsdyke notes that Herodotus' account of Spartan motives aligns perfectly with Athenian philosophy but is difficult to reconcile with Spartan oligarchic politics (2001, 334).

The important place that Athenian ideology has in Herodotus' writings is also evident in Otanes' speech on democracy. In the speech, Otanes praises a democratic system, which "determines offices by lot, and holds power accountable, and conducts all deliberating publicly" (3.80.6). For Otanes, the rule by lot and the general assembly of all the citizenry are not only hallmark characteristics of Athenian democracy, but the only form of true democracy. By contrasting the speeches of the three conspirators, it becomes clear that Herodotus most admires the Athenian democracy of Cleisthenes, which overthrew the tyranny, established freedom, and fought against Persian rule at Marathon and Salamis. (Kagan 1965, 69-70)

Herodotus references Athenian democratic ideology throughout his work, sometimes directly and other times through the words and allusions of his characters.⁷ For Herodotus, freedom results in strength and power, while tyranny weakens and restricts a state's growth. This can be seen in Demaratus' words to Xerxes, for example. According to Herodotus, the Athenians grew powerful because of their freedom, while the Spartans' effort to reinstate a tyrannical dynasty led to negative effects.

Athenian Imperialism

In the 5th century, Athens had expanded in wealth and power, subjugating most of the mainland and spreading its empire and influence even to Asia Minor and Ionia. After the Persian Wars, Athens had been in a position to subdue most of the other Greek city-states through open conflict or threats, and many Greek states were forced to pay tribute to the Athenians. Herodotus feared this would result in the downfall of Athens.

Though Forsdyke (227, 228) argued that city states naturally sought to expand so they could conquer and engulf smaller states and avoid being conquered by larger states, Herodotus did not share this view. Herodotus was very concerned about Athenian imperialism; he infused his work with parallels to contemporary Athenian politics that portrayed the roles of contemporary Athenian figures in a misleading fashion.

Herodotus' anti-imperialist beliefs were evident in his description of a speech in which Xerxes explains why Persia should attack Greece and the rest of Europe. Xerxes expresses the belief that Persia's future is at stake and shares his fear that Greece will attack the Persians if Xerxes does not strike first. Xerxes feels he must expand the empire and leave it greater than he received it, as his ancestors had done. Thus, Xerxes began a program of Persian expansion.

⁷ Translated from: πάλω μὲν ἀρχάς ἄρχει ὑπεύθυνον δὲ ἀρχήνεχει βουλευόμενα δὲ πάντα ἐς τὸ κοινὸν ἀναφέρει.

According to Forsdyke, Xerxes' words closely resembled those used by Pericles used in defense of his own imperialist expansion program in 5th century Athens. By putting Pericles' words in the mouth of a hated and corrupt tyrant, Herodotus drew a clear connection between Persian and Athenian expansion and suggested that Athenian imperialism was no better than Persian imperialism. Herodotus used Xerxes' speech to question whether Athenian imperialism would suffer the same fate as the Persians who were doomed to collapse by the overextension of their empire (Forsdyke 2007, 229-230).

Herodotus warned his contemporary Athenian audience that "soft lands breed soft people, hard lands breed durable and warlike people" (9.122). In other words, those who live on land that is fertile and produce luxury will be weak and timid, while those who live on infertile and inhospitable lands will be tough and hardy. As Herodotus relates, the Persians, while under the dominion of the Medes, were once a hardy and warlike people from a hard land. Because of this, they were able to rebel against the Medes and overthrow them, in turn conquering a vast empire of soft peoples. Ruling over these soft lands and timid peoples, the Persians themselves then became soft and timid in their life of luxury. When they then attacked the Greeks, who were shown to be a sturdy and hard people, the Persians were defeated. In Herodotus' time, the Athenians meteoric rise to wealth and power allowed them to live a life of luxury and greed, expanding to even more and softer lands. Herodotus used this comparison to alert his readers that Athens was in danger of following the same path as the Persians (Forsdyke 2007, 231).

Following the Persian defeat, Herodotus tells of malicious and cruel acts performed by several Athenian leaders. For instance, the Athenian army inflicts a terrible punishment upon Artaičtes: they crucify him and stone his young son to death before him (Herodotus 9.120.4). Such unnecessary and brutal acts of revenge show a baseness and animalistic spirit of the 'wise' Athenians after they have achieved power, drawing a connection between them and the barbarians they have just defeated. Moreover, the Athenian general Themistocles is said to have extorted money from the Andrians by the Athenian military (Herodotus 8.111). All of these examples are used by Herodotus to show the corrupting tendency of luxury and power on the Greeks; the war was barely even over and the Athenians, emerging as one of the two power-figures in Greece, were already committing inexcusable sins and acts of brutality (Forsdyke 2007, 232). Also, Herodotus places a high emphasis on natural boundaries and the sanctity of keeping them, noting that Xerxes' downfall was caused by his breaking of the natural barrier between Asia and Europe (the Hellespont). In this, Xerxes showed the hubris that so often causes strife in Greek literature. However, Xerxes is not the only one who attempted to expand his empire to another continent, as the Athenians of Herodotus' time were attempting to gain a foothold on the Greek states of Asia, swallowing them into the Athenian Empire. How could the Athenians not see their own hubris, which would certainly bring their downfall just as it did Xerxes' downfall (Raaflaub 2002, 173)?

Another instance of Herodotus' disapproval is the Athenian response to Mardonius when he asks them to submit. The Athenians, of course, immediately refused, saying that there was no sum of money or land that would make them turn against their friends, for they were all Greeks. In fact, the specific phrase used by Herodotus is "καταδουλώσαι τήν Ἑλλάδα;" "enslave Greece" (Herodotus 8.144.1). Oddly enough, as we have seen by Themistocles' actions later on in the narrative, the Athenians become the enslavers of Greeks and force their own race to pay them tribute. Herodotus clearly uses this to illustrate the great hypocrisy that the Athenians have allowed themselves to fall into through their corrupt imperialist expansion. In other words, the very same Athenians who fought for Greek freedom, who rallied around a battle cry of liberty, are now the πόλις τυράννος (tyrannical city) against which they have repeatedly opposed (Raaflaub 2002, 167).

Herodotus' most thorough critique of the Athenian imperialist mindset can be found in the story of Croesus, the first foreigner to force the Greeks to pay tribute (Herodotus 1.1.2). In Herodotus' time, the Athenians were forcing the Greeks to pay tribute. Just like the Athenians, Croesus pursued aggressive imperial expansion, "subjugat[ing] almost all the nations west of the Halys" (1.28.1).⁸ Moreover, Croesus is visited by an Athenian sage named Solon, the historical figure who is said to have broken Athens up into demes and established the foundation of Cleisthenes' democracy. Solon warns Croesus that his greed will eventually lead to his downfall, but Croesus does not heed him. Of course, as the audience finds out quickly, Croesus is almost immediately struck with misfortunes of every kind: his son is murdered, his kingdom destroyed, and he is taken as a prisoner-of-war. Croesus' tale serves as a warning to Herodotus' audience. Indeed, the Athenians' greed and imperial expansion led, ultimately, to defeat at the hands of the Spartans a few years later.

Propaganda in Herodotus' Work

As we have seen, Herodotus uses his work to critique the Greek world and, specifically, Athenian politics. In short, the *Histories* can be seen as a propaganda tool, but defining propaganda is a much more delicate matter. Jacques Ellul gives a compelling explanation of the properties of propaganda, voicing it as aiming at "effectively arming policy and giving irresistible power to its decisions" (1973, x). Furthermore, the Oxford English Dictionary defines propaganda as "the systematic dissemination of information, esp. in a biased or misleading way, in order to promote a political cause or point of view" (2010, def. 3). Between these two definitions, a working definition can be drawn as *the dissemination of political views in order to affect or propagate policy*.

There are many places in Herodotus' work where his own personal political beliefs shine through, either through direct speech or through the actions, thoughts, or words of one of the characters. According to some scholars, Herodotus is overly enthusiastic in his praise of Athenian democracy, almost to an oppressive extent; Kagan opposes this view, instead offering a more fitting explanation of Herodotus's praise (1965, 70). While Herodotus' pro-Athenian views are evident in his work, they were subversive enough to influence his audience without being oppressive.

One of the more interesting questions about Herodotus is whether he downplays Sparta in support of Athens. In Demaratus' speech to Xerxes, the former Spartan king explains why the Spartans will oppose Xerxes' army even if no other Greek stands with them:

[The Spartans] are free, yet not wholly free: law is their master, whom they fear much more than your men fear you. They do whatever it bids; and its bidding is always the same, that they must never flee from the battle before any multitude of men, but must abide at their post and there conquer or die (Herodotus 7.104).

By describing the Spartans as free, but still 'enslaved' to law, is Herodotus attempting to draw a contrast between the Spartan and Athenian governments? Perhaps it is just a trick of interpretation, and Herodotus is attempting to say that law (νόμος) is the basis for Greek freedom.

Clearly, Herodotus views the Athenian democratic process positively. Saxonhouse argues that, while Otantes ultimately did not win the Persian political debate, his speech was the most rhetorically pleasing and convincing (1996, 42). As was mentioned before, the system of government which Otantes lays out is the exact system instituted by Cleisthenes, the father of Athenian democracy. Because it was this argument that Herodotus chose to make the most

⁸ This was described by the words "κατεστραμμένων σχεδόν πάντων τῶν ἐντός Ἰλίου ποταμοῦ οἰκημένων."

convincing, it is clear that he is attempting to convince his audience of the same, perhaps to even draw a contradiction between the correct, democratic choice and the monarchical choice of the corrupt Persian enemy.

Every passage of the *Histories* can be viewed as a political dialogue with the academics of his day. Whether Herodotus is talking about the importance of equality, the correct form of government, the corruptness of contemporary Athenian imperialism, or simply portraying Athens in a positive light, the entire *Histories* can and should be viewed as propagandistic.

Conclusion

In all of ancient Greek literature, few writers can be said to be more influential and more subversive than Herodotus of Halicarnassus. His work on the Persian War not only gave us a history of one of the greatest conflicts in ancient times, but also formed the basis of the field of history for ages to come. Yet, Herodotus did not simply write history; he infused his work with his own political beliefs, making it both a tool of propaganda and an academic dialogue with the political theorists of the day.

Herodotus' fervent adherence to a democratic system over a monarchic one in the context of the Greek-Persian conflict is, in fact, a statement about the contrast between democratic freedom and monarchical tyranny. In addition, he described equality as central to Greek political theory and key to the distinction between free and oppressed societies. In his consideration of these ideas, Herodotus offers a strong affirmation of the Athenian political system, favoring it beyond any other Greek city. At the same time, Herodotus also recognizes that Athens is not perfect and offers a subtle but effective critique of the corruption that resulted from Athens' imperialist policies. It is clear that Herodotus is much more than the father of history, but also one of the first political thinkers of the Western world.

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