A Balanced Approach to the Depiction of Themistocles in Herodotus

For the past several decades, scholars have taken a number of different approaches to the treatment of Themistocles within Herodotus’ *Histories*. Some have seen Themistocles as acting out of self-interest and in this way personifying Athens (Immerwahr 1966; Wood 1972; Munson 1988). Others (specifically Blösel 2001 and 2004) have argued that the characterization of Themistocles in his trajectory from positive to a negative mirrors fifth century Athens. Yet both of these views, based on narrow readings of the *Histories*, limit our understanding of the sources*.* In this paper, I argue for a broader approach to the characterization of Themistocles in Herodotus’ work and propose that Herodotus was working with various nuanced lines of argument to create his portrayal of Themistocles.

Herodotus purposefully presents a two-sided portrait of Themistocles. On one level, this characterization does parallel the nature of the radical democracy, as has been argued by Blösel. Thucydides focuses on a single word, τόλμα, to describe the ἀρετή of Themistocles; in fact, every appearance of Themistocles in the *Histories* revolves around a major action or decision, which he influences in one way or another (e.g. 7.173.2; 8.4.2; 8.19; 8.22). For instance, Themistocles plays an integral part first in convincing the Athenians to construct ships of war (7.143-144) and then in persuading the rest of the Greeks to stay together and fight at Salamis (8.56.64). This urge to action (τόλμα) links Themistocles’ character with the action-driven Athenian democracy as described by Herodotus (5.78) and Thucydides (1.70). Blösel, however, does not pursue the argument to its final conclusion, namely that Themistocles was as much influenced by the Athenian democracy as he himself impacted it (Hdt. 8.110.1).

On another level, Herodotus’ depiction of Themistocles attempts to present a balanced portrait of the man to the Athenians, whose collective memory would have been shaped by the trial, conviction and eventual exile of Themistocles. Herodotus clearly presents a man who works within the bounds of the existing democratic system and who, after listening to different opinions on an issue, changes his own views. Themistocles himself, in fact, acknowledges the importance of being εὔβουλος, and calls a man who can be persuaded by good advice equivalent to a man who possesses his own good ideas (7.16). Often in changing his mind he is able to preserve the unity of the Greeks and obtain success (e.g. 7.143-4; 8.4-5; 8.123-4). All the same, Herodotus does not shy away from the mention of Themistocles’ κέρδος, or self-interested motivations, as in the case (e.g.) of his speech at Andros where entirely out of his own self-interest he looks attempts to persuade the Greeks not to destroy the bridge over the Hellespont entirely out of his own self-interest (8.108.2-8.112). Ultimately, Herodotus is attempting to offer the reader a broader range of evidence and he is not seeking to present an alternative account of Themistocles.

In the end, Herodotus paints a balanced portrait of a man who is absolutely critical to the later books of his *Histories* but leaves it up to the reader to pass judgment on his actions and his character. He employs the character of Themistocles first to introduce the dichotomy between the virtues and vices of the Athenian democracy and later to illustrate the danger of passing judgment on such a complicated man and the democratic system within which he was operating.

Works Cited

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