

The Most Cowardly Free Men?:

Darius' Bridge Across the Danube in Herodotus 4.142 and the Reputation of Classical Ionia

In c.519 BCE King Darius left a contingent of Greek tyrants and engineers to protect the bridge he had constructed across the Danube River (Hdt. 4.118–143). With Darius gone, the Greek leaders debated their options. Miltiades of Athens (then a tyrant in the Chersonese) suggested they destroy the bridge and abandon Darius, while Histiaeus of Miletus argued that it was through the Persian king that they held their positions. Histiaeus swayed his colleagues and so they devised a scheme to trick the Scythians and allow Darius to withdraw safely from this untamed land. The Scythians responded with insults against the Ionians, deeming them “master-loving slaves” and “the worst and most cowardly” free men. (Hdt. 4.142). This marks the earliest example of the negative reputation of Ionia that became entrenched at least by the early second century BCE when the Seleucid King Antiochus III declared to the Romans that the Ionians were accustomed to obedience to barbarian kings, and thus ought to be treated differently from the other Greeks (App. Syr. 3.12.1).

The perceived servility of Ionians is often taken as an irrefutable fact that shapes modern interpretations of Classical Ionia. In his recent monograph, Martin Hallmannsecker (2022) argued that while a positive definition of "Ionianness" formed only in the Hellenistic and Roman periods as the importance of individual poleis diminished, negative stereotypes were imposed on Ionians through literary tropes already in the Classical period. However, most of this literary evidence postdates the Classical period or is only preserved in later sources, which has led scholars like Gorman and Gorman (2014) to question prominent the idea of corrosive luxury was in the original context. Herodotus is the notable exception, it is often thought. But this creates a problem of circular argumentation when evaluating Herodotus' *History* for what it reveals about

Ionian identity: Herodotus provides evidence for a common belief about Ionia, which we know is a common belief because of what Herodotus wrote (as in e.g. Federico 2017; Samons 2017).

In this paper I use Herodotus' episode at the bridge over the Danube as a starting point to re-evaluate this consensus position about Classical Ionia. Recent scholarship on Herodotus has seen a renewed interest in the problem of sources. Some scholars have claimed to excavate material from the Alcmeonids (Murray 2001 and Thomas 1989), Chios (Federico 2017), merchants from Naucratis (Murray 2001), as well as the ancient biographical tradition that Herodotus spent time on Samos (e.g. Cartledge 1982), while another set of scholars have argued that the portrait of people and events better represent a critique of the Athenian empire (e.g. Blösel 2001; Irwin 2009). For the debate at the bridge on the Danube, Samons (2017) identifies a Kimonid tradition that burnished Miltiades' legacy at the expense of the Ionians. I propose that we must complicate these clear lines of influence, both in terms of Herodotus' sources and in terms of defining what he meant by Ionia. Not only should we not take this episode in Herodotus as authoritative, but I also argue that there was not a consensus Ionian reputation so much as a set of discourses that could be tapped into for different political purposes, in much the same way that Mac Sweeney (2013) has demonstrated that multiple competing versions of Ionian foundation stories coexisted in the fifth-century Aegean. Nevertheless, passages like this one set a precedent for stereotypes that were invested in seeing the political and military decline of Ionia in terms of effeminacy and indolence.

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