

Lessons in Violence: Bodies, Boundaries, and Vengeance in Herodotus' *Histories*

Throughout the *Histories*, Herodotus intersperses grim depictions of violated bodies in connection with cycles of enmity and retribution for offences both human and divine. This paper attempts to offer an explanation for Herodotus' inclusion of these extreme acts of violence and to further understand their purpose in his *Histories*. It proposes that Herodotus' narratives offer examples of individuals/institutions who transgress moral and physical boundaries set by the gods and, in turn, suffer violations of their own bodies for a specific purpose. The consequences of their transgressions act as grim lessons for the reader concerning the penalties of crossing these boundaries. In turn, boundaries of the body are violated because of the perpetrators' transgressions. They become objects of the gods' jealousy and vengeance to act as unforgettable *exempla* for Herodotus' lessons about appropriate behavior towards the divine and human beings and respect for boundaries.

Previous scholars such as Desmond (2004), Strid (2006), and Smolin (2018) have discussed divine or human vengeance against those overstepping boundaries. In particular, Desmond has observed that these episodes are part of Herodotus' interest in "great and wonderful deeds" (ἔργα μεγάλα τε καὶ θωμαστά) as part of his goals laid out in programmatic statements. Despite these broader themes, Herodotus is also interested in smaller-scale wonders, the extraordinary acts of otherwise obscure individuals. Hermotimus, because his achievement of having the greatest revenge (μεγίστη τίσις) against his victimizer, is one such example. None, however, have discussed the motif of bodily violation and the metaphorical potential of these bodies in connection with lessons concerning the breaking of boundaries. Beyond their purpose as a record of wonders, Herodotus may be offering his reader a moral commentary on unbridled

hubris, ambition, and excess through the deliberate choice of depicting bodily harm in his macabre accounts.

Before discussing specific examples of boundaries and bodily violation in Herodotus, this paper provides some background on the body as a metaphor for boundaries, which may prove useful for thinking about these violent episodes. In order to set up this comparison more broadly, I have turned to discussions of Neronian literature, specifically Lucan's treatment of bodies in his *Civil War* and the work's obsession with the destruction of bodies in addition to their use as a metaphor for the state. To support the Greek notion of the body as a metaphor, Aristotle's discussion of poetic composition and its relationship to the body will serve as further support for the broad use of the body as a representation of boundaries in antiquity.

In following case studies, violent depictions of vengeance and death pervade the *Histories* and often appear at critical points in the narrative such as the death of Cyrus in Book 1. Herodotus' choice of narrating the death of Cyrus at the hands of Tomyris and her subsequent desecration of his body seems to be a significant choice for this discussion given the peaceful account of his death in Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*. In Book 4, Pheretime's punishment of those who killed her son will also serve as another example of Herodotus' display of graphic suffering because of her excessive revenge. As a result of her excessive act, divine retribution violates Pheretime's own body as punishment. In Book 8, Panionius and his sons suffer bodily harm because of Panionius' past offenses. In this case, the divine leads him to suffer at the hands of one of his own victims, Hermotimus.

In each of the examples above, the individual violates physical, moral, and bodily boundaries and then suffers bodily harm as a result of their transgressions. The pattern of divine retribution on the body for these transgressions seems to have been a deliberate choice by

Herodotus. Cyrus, Pheretime, and Panionius fit this pattern of offense to divinity and humans followed by vengeance and bodily violation. Their overreach with respect to empire, revenge, and the violation of others' bodies meets a violation of their own bodies. Their violated bodies stand as metaphors for their own lack of respect for boundaries.

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