

## Δικαιότατος ἀνδρῶν: The Persian Policy of Cleomenes I in Herodotus' *Histories*

The *Histories* of Herodotus stands as the chief source for the reign of the Spartan king, Cleomenes I (c. 519 – c. 490 BCE). Herodotus' account, however, is confusing and largely hostile to Cleomenes, leading to a lack of certainty among modern scholars as to the particulars of the Spartan king's reign, and a tendency to either take the historian largely at his word (Jones 1967), or simply accept that his account is convoluted and unreliable (Cartledge 1979). Recognition of the negative tendencies of Herodotus' sources towards Cleomenes, and a reexamination of his narrative in this light, yield a more nuanced and useful interpretation.

Through examination of Cleomenes' response to three requests for assistance against the Persians, appearing separately in books III, V and VI, this paper will demonstrate that his vision of Spartan foreign policy included not only a desire for Spartan hegemony in Greece, but also a recognition of the threat to that hegemony presented by the growing power of Persia. Indeed, it is precisely because of his concern for the primacy of Sparta in Greece that Cleomenes adopts a policy of interest in the affairs of the Persians but restraint from actual engagement with them.

Herodotus' negative presentation obscures the consistency of Cleomenes' Persian policies and his acknowledgement of the threat that Persia represented to Spartan dominance. Alan Griffiths (1988) has argued convincingly that much of Herodotus' narrative stems from a tradition of "free floating malicious stories of the anti-tyrant type." The combination of literary tropes associated with strong, tyrannical rulers, and the likelihood that the negative perceptions of Cleomenes which existed among the Spartans created the tradition that informed Herodotus, leaves us with an unclear impression of Cleomenes' state of mind and motivations.

Scholars have long noted the inconsistency and harsh tone of the narrative, but little effort has been made to move beyond merely noticing and lamenting the confused state of the evidence (Cartledge 1979). This tendency has led to the emergence of a somewhat standard and largely Herodotean view of Cleomenes' foreign policy toward Persia: that he was interested in pursuing Spartan interests on the mainland, and that he took no interest in the Persians, earning him the nickname "the stay-at-home Spartan" (Selincourt 1962). A closer evaluation of his exploits, with an eye to his inconsistent representation by Herodotus, suggests an alternative interpretation may be necessary.

Taking into account Herodotus' reliance on hostile sources and the difficulties which that entails, this paper considers the response of Cleomenes to appeals from the Samian Maeandrius c. 517 (III.148), an embassy of Scythians three years later (VI. 84) and Aristagoras of Miletus in 499 (V.49), each requesting assistance for an attack against Persia. Such an examination suggests that Cleomenes did not ignore the Persian threat, despite denying all appeals, but that he formulated and adhered to a long-term policy of interested disengagement. Despite the limited inclusion of elaborative details and the inconsistent character profile created by Herodotus, these passages enable us to develop a clearer picture of the policies of Cleomenes, one that acknowledges his awareness of the looming Persian threat.

The general picture of Cleomenes that develops from Herodotus' narrative is convoluted and at times contradictory, but it does not preclude a meaningful interpretation of his exploits. Far from ignoring the Persian threat, Cleomenes was aware of and seemingly quite interested in their activities, likely in an effort to monitor the only major power in close proximity to the Greek world with the strength and manpower to rival Sparta for hegemony.

## Works Cited

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