Positing an Ideal Form of Monarchy in Herodotus' *Histories*

Almost every society described in Herodotus' *Histories* has experienced one-man rule. Under one-man rule, an individual is the sole possessor of political authority, which is attained and exercised either legitimately or illegitimately. Legitimate one-man rule (monarchy) is usually inherited or obtained by a community-sanctioned process. Illegitimate one-man rule (tyranny) is attained through non-traditional means that are often violent. Even tyrannies, however, can be passed on through hereditary channels – the Peisistratidae and the Mermnadae are examples. Some argue that the distinction between monarchs and tyrants in the *Histories* is constructed by scholars (Morgan, 2003). Munson (2003) suggests that access to the monarchy through cleverness or luck reveals its essential illegitimacy and hence falsifies the distinction. Other scholars assert that it is valid to distinguish between monarchy and tyranny because Herodotus presents some manifestations of one-man rule as acceptable constitutional forms (Davie 1979; Flory 1987). The potential for illegitimacy in monarchy has created an intense focus on tyrants and the nature of autocratic rule in the *Histories*. Dewald (2003) argues for a "despotic template:" an ideal form of tyranny in which all one-man rules partake at least in part. She asserts that the institution of tyranny exerts an influence on the individuals who fill the role, and that this influence can be observed in almost all individual instances of one-man rule. In this paper, I suggest a parallel "monarchical template:" the ideal form of monarchy that may also exert an institutional pull on those same individuals.

Darius posits an ideal form of monarchy in the Constitutional Debate (3.82). He suggests that a monarch is the best man, with the best views, and with the best ability to maintain stability in the state. Darius, however, is unclear on how any culture can ensure these qualities and avoid the slide into tyranny. I will focus upon the Ethiopians as a potential model for the monarchical template. Herodotus introduces this society by claiming that "the Ethiopians are the tallest and most attractive people and their customs are entirely different from others, especially when it comes to their kingship" (3.20). This introduction marks the Ethiopians as thematically significant because of their exceptional nature (Romm 1992, Bloomer 1993). The Ethiopians choose their king by judging who among them is the tallest and strongest. This practice is indeed exceptional among the societies Herodotus describes, for their kings are chosen by the community based upon traits that correlate to the community. The king's symbolic equation with his people is reinforced with each new election, rather than devolving through accident of birth to potentially less worthy kings. Herodotus describes one specific king who represents his people by withstanding Cambyses' attempts to spy on and dominate the Ethiopians. He does this by leading Cambyses' spies on a tour of his society that reinforces his praise of his own people and his denigration of the Persians. The Ethiopian kingship provides an ideal form of monarchy, one in which a legitimate rule reflects his people and their cultural values both internally and in interactions with outsiders.

The institutional power of a good monarchy may be seen in several other societies within the *Histories*. Cyrus, who occasionally overextends himself and his power, in the end is redeemed as a culture hero for defending traditional Persian values (9.122). The Spartan diarchy, which complicates both the despotic and monarchic templates, provides examples of individuals who act both tyrannically (Cleomenes) or heroically (Leonidas). The question is – Is the individual only reacting to or against the pull of the institution of tyranny, or is he or she also reacting to the pull of the institution of monarchy? All governments, as Darius suggests (3.82),

tend towards tyranny. I suggest that this pull can also be balanced by the institutional force of ideal democracy, ideal oligarchy, and ideal monarchy.

Works Cited: Positing and Ideal Form of Monarchy in Herodotus' *Histories*

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