

Messengers and Cyrus: Herodotus, Book One

Most scholarly work on messengers in Greek literature focuses on their role in tragedy or in Homer (e.g. Payne 2000), but generally ignores their prevalence in Herodotus. Yet messengers are frequent, vital characters in the *Histories* and their contribution to Herodotus' narrative is demonstrably significant. No one who reads Book One of the *Histories* can escape the pointed phrase describing Cyrus, *autos aggelos* (1.79), when he reaches Croesus. The connection between Cyrus, the messenger character, and concepts associated with messengers, made explicit in this statement, is carefully established by Herodotus throughout the Cyrus narrative of Book One. This association provides greater complexity to the politics of Cyrus' actions and a more ironic reading of his death among the Massagetae.

In terms of narrative cohesion, messengers intrinsically encapsulate and link two locations and two leaders for the audience. Thus they provide a natural tool for Herodotus to orient the reader when he wishes to change scenes (1.81) or return to a specific location after a lengthy digression (1.141). This is similar to the way in which the particle *mén* can be used as a narratological marker (Bakker 2006), but has the advantage of being concrete and immediately accessible to the audience. Also, in a similar fashion to *mén*, a messenger can mark a location that will be relevant later in the text: the character primes the audience to follow and anticipate separated elements of Herodotus' narrative.

Messengers can also be the bearers of moral lessons: to reject a message outright will lead to trouble ahead and may constitute the first sure sign of a breakdown in civil relations and diplomacy. This theme pervades Book One (e.g. 1.76, 1.153) and should be added to the pool of behavioral lessons that scholars ascribe to Herodotus (Lattimore 1939; Fisher 2002).

Messengers as narrative markers and as bearers of moral lessons come together in the Cyrus story, providing a new lens of analysis. In our first passage from Cyrus' point of view, his messengers to Ionia are spurned (1.76), and his subsequent arrival in Lydia (1.79) presents him as a messenger himself. This early link is inescapable and enduring through Cyrus' entire story. His interaction with messengers to and from various cultures (Ionia, Sparta, the Massagetae) signals destruction for those who reject messages, and sets up future action in Book One as well as in *Histories* as a whole. Indeed, Cyrus' own doom first is predicted by his rejection of a messenger from Tomyris (1.206, 212) and then is shown to us when Tomyris finds and degrades his body on the battlefield, acting herself as a messenger (1.214). Thus the figure of the messenger creates a strong ring-compositional element in the story of Cyrus' life and lends an ironic closure to it.

Works Cited

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