

## Herodotus and the Politics of *ethnos*

Although recent scholarship (Miller, 1997 and Raaflaub, 2009) has emphasized the receptivity of the Athenians to Persian culture and imperial mechanisms, many scholars still adhere to the notion that the Athenian ideology harshly contrasting Greek manliness, freedom and unity with Persian effeminacy, slavishness and disunity was a reflection of a real divide between the two cultures. In the case of Herodotus, however, recent scholarship (eg Flower, 2006) has argued that he was actively working to break down that dichotomy while still working to understand the miraculous victory of the Greeks, which the dichotomy served to explain. A delicate balance seems to need striking between Herodotus' two main trajectories—the narrative of the Persian Wars and the descriptions of the various peoples in the Persian Empire and the Greek world. While some scholars have gone so far as to argue that these two Herodotean lines of inquiry were written separately and then seamed together, a look at the political dimensions of ethnicity within the *Histories* show that they are intimately related and necessarily bound together in the narrative.

This paper builds from the evolving discussion on the Persian/Greek dichotomy and the process of identity formation in ancient Greece after the Persian Wars focusing primarily on Herodotus. I argue that we need to understand Herodotus' definition of Greek identity (8.1.44.1–3) with reference to the debate on the constitutions (3.80–82) and the story of the rise of Persia that precedes it, specifically the story of Deïokles (1.95ff). I will argue that for Herodotus ethnic identity is inseparable from and subordinate to political constitutions in understanding a people's "nature." In essence, Herodotus is fusing *ethne*-based identification with *polis*-based identification in order to understand the Greek victory in 479BC within the context of its internecine warfare of the century following. There is no separation of the two strands of the history. In the Deïokles episode especially (with the pattern repeated in the ascension of Darius) we see that the innate ethnic character of the Persians is made manifest in their rejection of freedom when it is offered and their easy regression to monarchy.

According to the anonymous Athenian speakers of Herodotus, the Greek people share blood, language, religion and customs. This is what leads the Athenians to refuse an agreement with Persia. The unity of the Greeks in this area, however, is overshadowed by the political disunity that marks the Greek allies in books seven and eight of the *Histories*. The point is emphasized even more through Herodotus' emphasis on the ethnic unity and political disunity of the Greeks in contrast to the ethnic diversity but political unity of the Persians. For Herodotus, "custom is king" (3.38.4) and what he means by custom is politics. By forging this subordinate relationship between custom and the other ethnic markers, he subtly reinforces Greek chauvinism while also erasing the problem Greek political disunity might play in his arguments for why the Greeks were victorious in the Persian Wars.

Such an analysis suggests that while an *ethnos* is defined through shared language, religion and customs, political constitutions are the most important manifestation of custom and as such the key to understanding the strength and weakness of a people. As such they are also a manifestation of the innate characteristics of a people more so than their language and religion since it is custom, not religion or language that dictates morality and practices. Greek customs mark the Greeks as a people who value self-rule, which is made clear in their polis system and their fierce resistance to interference by both fellow Greeks and foreign powers alike. Persians, however, are accustomed to being ruled by others and in those brief moments where they seem to sense freedom as the Greeks understood it, they regress to enslavement falling back on the

customs of their ancestors which was, as the story of Deiokles shows, really a moment of weakness.

Works Cited in Abstract:

Flower, Michael. "Herodotus and Persia." In *The Cambridge Companion to Herodotus*, edited by C. Dewald and J. Marincola. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Miller, Margaret. *Athens and Persia in the Fifth-Century BC: A Study in Cultural Receptivity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Raaflaub, Kurt. "Learning from the Enemy: Athenian and Persian 'Instruments of empire.'" In *Interpreting the Athenian Empire*, edited by J. Ma, N. Papazarkadas and R. Parker. London: Duckworth Press, 2009.