

What is a Woman's οἶκος? Herodotus and Kinship

At Herodotus 3:119, Darius is moved by the lamentations of the unnamed wife of Intaphernes, who has seen both her husband and his entire household --τε τὸν Ἴνταφρένεα καὶ τοὺς παῖδας αὐτοῦ καὶ τοὺς οἰκηίους πάντας -- condemned to die for Intaphernes' disrespect of the king's authority (and violation of the king's personal space). Darius offers to spare the life of one member of her family, but she must choose which: πέμψας δὲ ἄγγελον ἔλεγε τάδε: “ὦ γύναι, βασιλεύς τοι Δαρεῖος διδοῖ ἕνα τῶν δεδεμένων οἰκηίων ρύσασθαι τὸν βούλειαι ἐκ πάντων.

She chooses, not her husband or one of her children, but her *brother*, surprising Darius, who points out that the brother is more distant (ἀλλοτριώτερός τοι) than her sons, and (presumably) less dear (ἥσσον κεχαρισμένος) to her than a husband. Called to account she explains that, while she can always get another husband, and then new sons, her brother is irreplaceable:

ἦ δ' ἀμείβετο τοῖσιδε. “ὦ βασιλεῦ, ἀνὴρ μὲν μοι ἂν ἄλλος γένοιτο, εἰ δαίμων ἐθέλοι, καὶ τέκνα ἄλλα, εἰ ταῦτα ἀποβάλοιμι: πατὴρ δὲ καὶ μητὴρ οὐκέτι μευ ζώντων ἀδελφεὸς ἂν ἄλλος οὐδενὶ τρόπῳ γένοιτο. ταύτη τῇ γνώμῃ χρεωμένη ἔλεξα ταῦτα.

Charmed, Darius spares not just the brother but the oldest son; Intaphernes and the other relatives are put to death.

The relationship of this story to a rather vexed passage in Antigone's death song (ANT 904-20 in the New Oxford Classical text) has often been noted, with all but a few scholars concluding that the influence ran, whether directly or indirectly, from the historian to the dramatist rather than the other way round -- see West (1999) and Dewald and Kitzinger (2006). But in a non-Greek context, and absent the rather overdetermined kin relations of the Oedipus clan, what concept of family or household was Herodotus starting from? Why was the brother – a relative of Intaphernes only by marriage, not by blood – imprisoned in the first place? How far does the οἶκος extend, and by what principles? Is this nameless woman acting on her own behalf as an individual (as Darius seems to expect) or on behalf of her birth family, against her affines? Does a woman's concept of οἶκος differ from a man's -- or at least a king's -- in some fundamental, structural way?

Herodotus is often described as the first anthropologist, or the inventor of ethnography; scholars have also often noted his openness to including the experience of women (as contrasted for instance with Thucydides), and this story is only one of many examples of successful female agency and "voice." What has not yet been fully explored is what Herodotus may have to say about kinship understood as a *system*, a way of organizing public and private relationships, and managing power dynamics both in terms of family and state. I propose to begin that investigation.

We will not, of course, learn much from Herodotus about actual Persian kinship, but following Rosalind Thomas's persuasive argument for interpreting Herodotus as an active participant in the intellectual and political debates of his own day, we may learn something about Greek models of gender as projected upon Persian "others." What is the relationship of polis to oikos? in the final analysis, is the oikos male (a basis for clan solidarity and violence, as Darius suspects) and/or is it also a staging ground for women to challenge that? My paper will analyze these questions in the context of discussions of kinship in feminist theory, from Gayle Rubin's now-classic "The Traffic in Women" (1970) to Judith Butler's *Antigone's Claim* (2000) and beyond.

Judith Butler, *Antigone's Claim: Kinship between Life and Death*. Columbia University Press, 2000.

Carolyn Dewald and Rachel Kitzinger, "Herodotus, Sophocles and the Woman Who Wanted Her Brother Saved." *The Cambridge Companion to Herodotus*. Eds. Carolyn Dewald and John Marincola. Cambridge University Press, 2006. 122-129.

Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex", in Rayna Reiter, ed., *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, New York, Monthly Review Press, 1975.

Rosalind Thomas, *Herodotus in Context: Ethnography, Science and the Art of Persuasion*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000.

Stephanie West, "Sophocles' Antigone and Herodotus Book Three," *Sophocles Revisited. Essays presented to Sir Hugh Lloyd-Jones*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, 109-136.