Herodotus’ Athenian Nomads

In 480 BCE, the Athenians abandoned their homes and territory to fight Xerxes at Salamis; in a famous passage, Herodotus praises the Athenians for their courageous action, saying that the war could not have been won without it (7.139). What has not been fully appreciated is a parallel with Herodotus’ equally famous Scythian ethnography: the Scythians, too, could not be defeated by Darius precisely because they were nomads (4.46). Herodotus admires the Scythians for developing the ability to evade any attacker; the Athenians, the historian implies, defeated Xerxes in a similar manner, by abandoning their territorial rootedness and becoming nomads.

Scholars (e.g., Hartog 1988, Payen 1997, Corcella 2007) have long noted that the carefully planned architecture of Herodotus’ work places Darius’ expedition against the Scythians closely in parallel with Xerxes’ invasion of Greece, and that the former – Persia’s first crossing into Europe – provides numerous precedents for the latter. Both Persian kings cross major waterways, engage in hubristic acts, and aim at total subjugation of their targets; both expeditions end in total failure. Moreover, the historian has Artabanus – who had previously advised Darius against attacking Scythia (4.83) – offer Xerxes a warning in which he explicitly recalls that the earlier disaster was caused by the Persians’ inability to conquer nomads (7.10). Herodotus’ Scythian narrative thereby frames our expectations in reading his account of Salamis: when the Athenians become nomads, this is a portent of victory and forms a key part of Herodotus’ assessment of Athens’ great achievement.

Moreover, the idea of Athenians as nomads offers insight into changing views of the *polis* and of what it meant to be Athenian in fifth-century thought. Herodotus’ Themistocles insists that the Athenians are still a *polis* despite abandoning their city, since a *polis* is really its fighting men on their ships (8.61-2). This view, further developed in the late fifth century by Athenians such as Thucydides’ Nicias (7.64, 77), is rooted in the same concept of a nomadic community untethered to the land and forms a key building block of Pericles’ strategy of abandoning the Attic countryside during the Peloponnesian War (Thuc. 1.143; cf. Constantakopoulou 2007, Taylor 2010). Herodotus’ narratives of Scythians and Athenians, I suggest, offer a commentary on these ideas in light of his conception of ethnic categories.

François Hartog writes that “the Scythians are ‘Athenians,’ yet at the same time they are quite opposite, since they are nomads” (Hartog 1988, 56). Although recent work (Pelling 1997, Munson 2001, Mitchell 2007, Gruen 2011; cf. Hall 2002) has sought to soften Hartog’s dichotomies and mirrors, this most basic one has remained: in most eyes, while the Greeks stood for the civic order of a *polis* civilization tied to a specific territory, the Scythians were disorderly barbarian nomads who lacked the rootedness necessary for agricultural civilization. But Herodotus, I argue, is actually undercutting this dichotomy in order to highlight the fluidity of the categories “Greek” and “barbarian.” In the moment when Greekness was defined against the barbarian Persians, the Athenians achieved victory by becoming barbarian nomads.

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