

## Plataea for Athenians: Herodotus' Athenocentric Telling of the Decisive Battle

Herodotus' preoccupation with Athens in his version of the Battle of Plataea<sup>1</sup> suggests that, unlike other portions of the *Histories*, this episode is aimed at an Athenian audience in the 440s B.C. Most strikingly, Herodotus' favorable portrayal of Athens in the Plataea episode is markedly inconsistent with the narratives surrounding it, which recount the aftermath of Salamis (8.97-135) and of Plataea (9.71ff). In these framing sections, Athens is often peripheral or portrayed negatively, whereas in the Plataea episode Athens is central to almost every event and always portrayed positively. This phenomenon is all the more remarkable because the Battle of Plataea is generally identified as one of the greatest *Spartan* victories of the 5<sup>th</sup> century (as shown, for example, by the Serpent Column and Simonides' commemorative elegy). In Herodotus' account, however, Sparta is largely ineffective – even ridiculed – and more often serves to praise Athens than merits praise itself. I argue that this substantial portion of the narrative, a little less than eighty chapters, exhibits these characteristics because it is in fact intended for an Athenian audience.

Herodotus' portrayal of non-Athenian states in the same episode supports this conclusion. Herodotus treats Phocis and Macedonia favorably, like Athens, while Sparta is marginalized, other states are decried as cowards, and still others, Thebes in particular, are denounced as traitors to the Greek cause. Herodotus' emphatic denunciation of these medizers is notable considering that Phocis and Macedon, the two non-Athenian nations which Herodotus portrays positively in the Plataea episode, themselves fought for the Persians at Plataea. This dissonance, I argue, reflects the diplomatic sympathies of Herodotus' Athenian audience. Herodotus is generally supposed to have published in the 420s or later, however, when Phocis and Macedon were not allies of Athens but of Sparta. Instead, the diplomatic alignment of the Plataea episode

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<sup>1</sup> Defined for the purposes of this paper as *Histories* 8.136-9.70 following the compositional strategy outlined below.

reflects the situation two decades earlier, during the Second Sacred War (early 440s). Using Thucydides' account, I demonstrate that every state portrayed positively in the Plataea episode was on the Athenian side during this war, and every state portrayed negatively was on the opposing side (or at least in Athens' bad graces). It would seem, then, that Herodotus targets his version of Plataea at an audience of Athenians from a period well before the generally accepted date of Herodotus' publication.

I would not, however, challenge the accepted publication date, nor do I propose a strictly analyst approach such as Jacoby's 'collage of lectures,'<sup>2</sup> which has been rightly rejected. Instead, I propose to follow a recently popular but largely unexplored theory: that Herodotus worked for many years as a *logopoios* in and around Athens, but retired to Thurii in his later years to commit his *logoi* to writing.<sup>3</sup> This theory suggests a continuous and unitary composition of the written *Histories*; throughout this process, I propose, Herodotus would have been capable of drawing upon a number of pre-composed *logoi*. Thus when Herodotus, writing down his *Histories*, came to the Battle of Plataea, rather than starting over from scratch he would have relied on the popular and well-known account of Plataea which he had recited many times before. In the process, he could have adapted the *logos* to conform to the preceding narrative – a “παρενθήκη,” in Herodotean terms (*Histories* 1.186). He appears to do just this when he ties Mardonius' death back to the Thermopylae episode and the larger retribution theme (9.64.1). What is remarkable about the Plataea episode is that such an intrusion occurs only once in almost eighty chapters. The rest of the Plataea episode conforms to the over-arching compositional strategy, adapting the story of Plataea to an Athenian audience.

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<sup>2</sup> In Pauly's *Encyclopedia*, “Herodotus” (1913).

<sup>3</sup> Proposed originally by Lattimore 1958, recently followed by Rösler and Moles (in *Brill's Companion to Herodotus*, 2002) and Evans 2009.

Accordingly, I propose that Herodotus originally composed the high-profile tale of Plataea for an audience of Athenians or their allies in the 440s, which composition he later used when writing his *Histories*. This earlier Athenian audience would have relished the prominence of their city in Herodotus' account, especially considering the prevalent Spartan-centric traditions of the battle like Simonides' elegy. Herodotus the *logopoios* might even have competed directly with the poets of his time, presenting his own version of events in stark contrast with the more traditional accounts, and all this well before he *wrote* a single word.

#### Works Cited

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