

Herodotus and the Urns of Zeus : A Homeric Allusion in the *Histories*

Ancient and modern readers alike have noted the affinity between Homer and Herodotus, fountainheads of their respective genres. Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Longinus, and the Halicarnassus inscription (*editio princeps* by Isager 1999) dub Herodotus a "prose Homer." The connection between the two authors has engaged a host of modern scholars as well, including Immerwahr 1966, Lang 1984, Nagy 1987, Murray 1988, Fehling 1989, Ostwald 1991, Boedeker 2002. This paper contributes to the discussion by unveiling a previously unnoticed Homeric allusion in Herodotus' account of the Battle of Thermopylae.

The disparity between powerful gods and vulnerable humans is emphasized throughout the *Histories*. The theme usually is invoked as a warning to heedless despots, whose good fortune merely exposes them to more devastating collapses. While the programmatic stories of Croesus and Polycrates have garnered more attention (e.g. Stahl 1975, Lateiner 1989, Erbse 1992, Moles 1996, van der Veen 1996, and Fisher 2002), the theme is equally significant in the Thermopylae narrative. It emerges when Leonidas' men summon aid from their Locrian and Phocian allies. Along with reassuring details about military preparations, their message contains philosophical encouragement for the struggle ahead: though he may seem invincible, Xerxes remains human, and no human is exempt from adversity (7.203.2). This notion of human vulnerability pervades Greek literature, but Herodotus here alludes to perhaps the earliest, most cogent expression of the theme: *Iliad* 24 and Achilles' description of Zeus' urns, from which the god concocts mixed fortunes for all people (24.525-30).

Herodotus' Book 7 passage declares that some portion of τὸ κακόν is reserved for every mortal, an idea also stressed by Achilles in *Iliad* 24. Both passages, featuring the same verb with different prefixes (συνεμίχθη, ἀμμείζαζ), employ the image of mixing τὸ κακόν into human life.

Moreover, both connect this human condition to the fundamental difference between mortal and immortal. Xerxes is a human (ἄνθρωπον, θνητὸν), not a god (θεὸν), and thus cannot succeed at every venture. Achilles is resigned to the pain and disappointment of mortal existence, governed by deities who feel no sorrow themselves. After describing the mortal condition in general, he offers the specific example of his father Peleus, who has known the extremes of both happiness and woe (*Il.* 24.534-40). This brief biography of Peleus resonates with the dispatch concerning Xerxes' human frailty. Both passages stipulate that mixed fortune begins at birth (ἐξ ἀρχῆς, ἐκ γενετῆς). The disparity between gods and humans is emphasized, for Peleus, like Xerxes, is identified as θνητός, a condition underscored by his unlikely marriage to a goddess. He joins the Persian King and all other mortals in receiving τὸ κακόν from god. Above all, his later suffering is contrasted with his former glory, which stemmed from wealth and blessedness (πλοῦτος, ὄλβος). The latter words are central to the dialogue of Croesus and Solon, which contains Herodotus' paradigmatic statement on the theme of mixed fortune (1.32). The *Iliad* thus furnishes a precedent for the historian's basic view of human instability, and the closest verbal parallels exist in his Thermopylae narrative. This Homeric allusion is central to Herodotus' presentation of Thermopylae as a moral victory.

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