

Herodotus' Critique of Solon's Political Theory

In this paper, I suggest that the Peisistratus digression within Herodotus' *Croesus-logos* (1.59-64) critiques Solon's authority as a theoretical political advisor by intimating the failure of his practical legislative action. Herodotus' initial description of him as a preeminent (καὶ δὴ καὶ Σόλων, 1.29) wise man of his time establishes him in an advisory role. Throughout the history of Greek literature, Solon has been recognized as one of the Seven Sages, a figure whose wisdom had application to politics (e.g. Plato *Timaeus* 20d-e, 21b-d; Plutarch *Life of Solon* 3.3-3.4). Martin notes a possible recognition of the Seven Sages tradition in Herodotus which would carry out this relationship between wisdom and politics (Martin 1993: 125n16). Chiasson argues for a relationship between Solon's own thought and that of the Herodotean Solon (Chiasson 1986). Herodotus' Solon is thus an early model of the application of wisdom to politics which later thinkers had available for adopting or critiquing. Many scholars have suggested that the Herodotean Solon is a literary representative for the author. Shapiro, for example, lays out parallels between Solon's speech on "the jealousy of the gods and the ephemeral nature of human happiness (1.29-33)" and Herodotus' own comments on these matters to suggest that "Herodotus does in fact agree with the views expressed by his character Solon" (Shapiro 1996: 348-349). She convincingly suggests that "Herodotus meant [Solon's] speech [to Croesus] to be programmatic, setting forth basic assumptions about the nature of human life and its relation to the gods which could then provide a philosophical framework for the *Histories* as a whole" (362).

While the views expressed by the Herodotean Solon do appear programmatic for the rest of the historian's narrative (as Shapiro suggests), his character does not fulfill them. Herodotus initially presents Solon as a renowned traveling wise man who visits Croesus at the height of his

power. Solon is away from Athens for ten years while his laws take effect (1.29). After seeing his wealth and being asked who the happiest of men is, Solon refuses to gratify Croesus by identifying him as this person. Rather, he claims it is necessary to look at one's end to know whether this person is truly happy. The person whom Solon does claim to be the happiest, Tellus the Athenian, meets his end while his city is prosperous, his children and grandchildren are alive and well, and he himself is honored among his people (1.30). Croesus recognizes the wisdom of Solon's words too late, after his favorite son has been killed, his kingdom conquered, and himself near execution. His recognition of his unfortunate circumstances vis-à-vis Solon's advice seems to confirm Solon's own competence.

But the reforms of Solon himself, as Thompson notes, "did not have the impact he wished, and he was to suffer the indignity of being succeeded by the tyrant Peisistratus" (Thompson 2009: 79). Herodotus emphasizes Solon's legislative failures, I suggest, by placing the digression on Peisistratus' rise in Athens soon after Solon's departure from Sardis. This juxtaposition of Athenian sage and Athenian tyrant invites the reader to reflect upon Solon's fortunes in the context of his own advice to Croesus. While Solon's words resonate deeply at Croesus' defeat, Solon himself has already vanished as a character from Herodotus' narrative. He appears again only in passing mention after he departs Croesus' court (1.86; 2.177; 5.113). But the reader of Herodotus' *Histories* never learns how Solon meets his end. His death is apparently unheralded (as opposed to the characters of Solon's tales), and all the reader knows of his city is that it has succumbed to faction, resulting in the Peisistratid tyranny. Given his absence from the Peisistratid narrative, he may not even be present in Athens at his own end and his city's downfall. There is a disconnect between the theoretical aim of Solon's laws and their practical implementation and governance in Athens, and Solon's physical distance from Athens during its

time of need reflects this disconnect. Inasmuch as Croesus failed to apply Solon's theoretical lessons to his political action, Solon's political action was too theoretical to be effective. Herodotus' Croesus-Solon encounter thus calls for a closer relationship between political theory and practice.

Works Cited:

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