

Tragic Allusion and Elusive Truths in Herodotus' Ninth Book

'Tragic history', according to a recent formulation, is not so much a stand-alone genre as 'a particular color in an artist's palette, used in specific places for a particular effect' (Rutherford 2007). Herodotus makes artful use of this color in the particular context of the beginning of the ninth book of his *Histories*, where, I argue, he makes use of an expressly Aeschylean image of the Greek mythic past, focalized through the gaze of Xerxes' commander Mardonius, to powerful effect. Here at 9.3 Herodotus delves into Mardonius' mind to explain his desire to take Athens a second time, conjecturing that he was moved by obstinacy twinned with the prospect of signaling the news to the Great King by means of beacon fires on successive islands. First Macan (1908), and more recently Marincola and Flower (2002), have raised the alluring possibility that Herodotus, in mentioning these fire signals, invokes not a literal and historical 'Mardonigraph' but rather the famous opening scene of Aeschylus *Agamemnon*. I test this possibility in light of its neglected context -- a conjecture about motivation rather than a statement of fact -- and explore its multifaceted and ironic contribution to the historian's portrayal of Mardonius' character and motivation. Further, I argue, the image must be viewed in the context of the wider poetic texture of Herodotus' narrative at this point, which complicates a reading in terms simply of Mardonius' personal delusion, and perhaps even gestures towards 'tragic' notions of divine involvement and inevitability. The allusion feeds into the *Histories*' broader narrative patterns, and perhaps also engages with urgent late fifth-century discussion regarding justice and excess in (Athenian) imperialism.

The paper thus investigates the presence and effects of tragic allusion in Herodotus the historian's toolkit. Tragic allusion emerges as a most powerful means of engaging readers in reflecting on history's more speculative realms (in this case, realms of character and motivation), of commenting upon and enriching the narrative of *ta genomena*, 'what actually happened', and more broadly of inviting readers to expand their interpretative frameworks.