

Sophrosyne or Aphrosyne? The Seven Sages as Herodotean Advisors

"Know Thyself" (Chilon); "Nothing in Excess" (Solon); "Measure is Best" (Cleobulus); "Know the Right Moment" (Pittacus); "Be Moderate in Good Times, Be Sensible in Bad" (Periander). Although some of these maxims are more familiar than others, they are all immediately recognizable as proverbs of the Seven Sages, who lived on the Greek mainland and the coast of Asia Minor in the late 7th and early 6th centuries BC (DK10, Engels 12). Although the names of the Sages vary from one list to another, the most frequently cited list includes Thales of Miletus, Bias of Priene, Pittacus of Mytilene, Solon of Athens, Chilon of Sparta, Cleobulus of Lindos, and Periander of Corinth (Snell 71; Barkowski 2244; Martin 109). By the mid-fifth century, the Seven Sages were well known for their proverbs, many of which expressed the ideal of *sophrosyne*, a combination of self-knowledge, self-restraint and the acceptance of limit (Barkowski 2256; North 9-10).

Six of the Seven Sages appear as characters in Herodotus' *Histories*: Thales, Solon, Bias, Pittacus, Periander and Chilon (only Cleobulus, the least famous, is absent). All of these men give practical advice, often expressed in pithy sayings. I will argue that our understanding of Herodotus' text is enhanced when these advisors and their advice are considered within the context of the tradition of the Seven Sages.

The Seven Sages appear as advisors in eleven passages in the *Histories*; most of these (seven) occur in Book 1. In all of these passages (except for two, 5.52 and 5.53, discussed below), the Sages advise others to think realistically about their situations (1.29, 1.86, 2.177, 7.235), to practice self-restraint (1.59, 1.74-75, 1.170 bis) or to limit their plans for conquest (1.27). In presenting the Seven Sages as advocating self-knowledge and self-restraint, Herodotus was following an already well-established tradition linking the Sages with *sophrosyne* (North

10). His purpose in drawing on this tradition was to establish his definition of wise advice; wise advice follows the ideal of *sophrosyne* (Rademaker 194), just as the sayings of the famous Seven Sages did.

But as soon as Herodotus establishes the Seven Sages as models for the wise advisor, he begins to expand the paradigm. Beginning in Book 1 (and continuing throughout the *Histories*) Herodotus shows us other wise advisors, including the Lydian, Sandanis (1.71), the Spartan queen Gorgo as a child (5.97), and the Persian, Artabanus (7.10) giving good advice based on the principle of *sophrosyne*. Those who accept the advice of self-restraint do well; those who reject it fare badly. The conclusion to be drawn from these examples is clear: wise advice is wise advice, no matter who is giving it.

But Herodotus also uses *sophrosyne* to criticize the inclusion of Periander within the traditional canon. Periander appears twice as an advice-giver: at 5.52 and 5.53 (using his daughter as a mouthpiece). In both passages Periander gives advice to his son and he makes generous use of proverbs and pithy sayings, thus establishing his link with the Seven Sages tradition (contra Busine 12). But the content of Periander's proverbs is the opposite of *sophrosyne*; Periander consistently advises his son to value wealth, power and position above everything else. And the result of Periander's advice is disastrous. Herodotus does not actually remove Periander from the canon of Seven Sages (as Plato will later do at *Protagoras* 343A), but his message is perfectly clear. Advice should be judged by the standard of its wisdom, not the reputation of the person who delivers it.

Bibliography

Barkowski, O. 1958. "Sieben Weise." *RE* 2nd ser., vol. 2 pt. 2, col. 2242-64. Stuttgart.

Busine, Aude. 2002. *Les Sept Sages de la Grèce Antique*. Paris.

Diels-Kranz. 1952. *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*. 6th ed. rev. W. Kranz. vol. 1 Berlin.

Engels, J. 2010. *Die sieben Weisen*. München.

Fehling, D. 1985. *Die sieben Weisen und die frühgriechische Chronologie*. Bern.

Martin, R. 1993. "The Seven Sages as Performers of Wisdom." In Dougherty and Kurke, eds. *Cultural Poetics in Archaic Greece*. Cambridge. Pages 108-128.

North, H. 1966. *Sophrosyne: Self-Knowledge and Self-Restraint in Greek Literature*. Ithaca, NY.

Rademaker, A. 2005. *Sophrosyne and the Rhetoric of Self-Restraint*. Leiden.

Shapiro, S. 1996. "Herodotus and Solon." *ClAnt* 15: 348-364.

Snell, B. 1974⁴. *Leben und Meinungen der sieben Weisen*. München.