

Reading Herodotus and Solon in Tandem: An Argument from Numeracy

Even before Herodotus rose from “mere story teller” (Immerwahr 1956: 241) to “skilled raconteur” (Casson 1974: 111) in the latter half of the twentieth century, scholars often associated the Father of History with Solon (ca. 630-ca. 560 BCE), the father of Athenian law and one of the so-called “Seven Sages” of antiquity (Shapiro 1996: 348 n. 1 and Pelling 2004: 103 n. 43.). Now that Herodotus has been redeemed, as it were, from simplicity and credulity, it has become even more of a commonplace to view him in the light of the worldly and learned pursuits of Solon, so much so that James Redfield (1985: 102) and Silvia Montiglio (2005: 133) even consider Solon to be Herodotus’ “alter ego.” The many similarities that have been observed between Herodotus and Solon are indeed uncanny, but one shared aspect of their thought has gone unnoticed by scholars, namely, an interest in numbers that extends beyond arithmetic *per se*.

Such an interest becomes programmatic beginning with the famous meeting between Solon and the Lydian king Croesus early on in the first book of the *Histories* (1.29-33), in which Solon shifts from a qualitative to quantitative line of reasoning to reinforce his point that contingency and mutability make it impossible for Croesus to be considered “the most blessed of all men.” In correctly calculating 26,250 days for 70 years as the span of human life and subjecting each of them to chance (*sumphorē*, 1.32), Solon displays his dexterity with numbers by performing a rare combination of multiplication and division (apparently without an abacus). But he then undermines the authority of this numerical argument by distinguishing uncertainty as the only certainty in matters as inscrutable as the numbering of one’s remaining days. Thus, Solon shows that this empirical argument, even when reckoned accurately, is still subject to external forces that oversee human affairs.

I propose that this paradoxical deployment of numbers is also an important aspect of Herodotean *apodexis* (i.e. demonstration, display, proof), which may in turn allow us to establish a closer connection between Herodotus and Solon beyond biographical similarities alone. Although Herodotus seems keen to show the breadth of his knowledge by performing arithmetical calculations (Keyser 1986 & 2006) in keeping with an overriding desire to “display his inquiry” (*historiēs apodexis*, 1.1.0), he, like Solon, seems even keener to show how mathematical proofs can only prove uncertainty when taken by themselves.

I present several case studies which speak to this understanding of *apodexis*. Chief among them is Herodotus’ investigation of the chronology of the Egyptian kings (2.142-44), in which he performs a series of calculations (again, as it seems, without an abacus) to show that the kings’ collective reign of 341 generations (as indicated to him by the priests of Zeus at Thebes (*apodeiknunte*s, 2.142.1) equals 11,340 years. Even though the priests can count (*apodeiknusan*, *apedexan*, etc., 2.143) all 341 generations as represented by statues of their high priests on display in the temple, they are at pains to prove to Hecataeus of Miletus that they do not possess a divine lineage which he claims for himself. They must go beyond the numbers into the realm of mythology to make their point (2.144). Even when they elaborate, however, there is no indication that their *apodexis* has convinced Hecataeus. In this way, Herodotus, like his counterpart Solon, shows here as elsewhere that *apodexis* cannot always be taken as a guarantor of irrefutable, objective accuracy. In short, an argument from numbers, though a critical component of *apodexis* in the *Histories*, must be understood as one part of a greater whole.

Bibliography

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