

## Wise Men Rush In? The Caution of Croesus in Herodotus' *Histories*

When one thinks about the Croesus *logos* in Herodotus' *Histories*, a number of thematic motifs come to mind: Croesus' excessive wealth, his interaction with Solon, his role as the first of many eastern monarchs, and his hubristic testing of the oracles. In this paper, I will argue for another – and I think overlooked – aspect of Croesus' characterization in the text: his excessive caution. Croesus shares this characteristic with the Spartans as they are presented in both Herodotus and Thucydides and he is closely linked with them throughout Herodotus Book One.

Throughout Book One of the *Histories*, we are presented with a character who applies extreme care in his actions. Croesus listens to the advice of Bias of Priene and ceases to plan an attack on the Greek islanders because of his inexperience in naval warfare (1.27). He tries to avert his son's death by keeping him away from any possible violence (1.34-45). He carefully plans his attack on the Persians in response to their growing power (1.46) — this careful response includes his testing of the oracles and his investigation into the Greek cities. He forms alliances not only with Sparta but with other powers in the region, including both Egypt and Babylon (1.77). Croesus is cautious despite the fact that he leads the “most courageous and bold race in Asia” (1.79). He takes the fight to the Persians, following a plan which he views is the safest for his own empire. Although he rebukes Croesus for attacking him when they could have been allies, later in Book 1 Cyrus is convinced by this careful strategy when Croesus advises it before the Persians attacks the Massagetae (1.207). Croesus' plans to launch preemptive strikes are, for the most part, unparalleled later in the *Histories*, except by a city to whom he is closely linked in the first book — the Spartans.

The Spartans are famous for being slow and cautious, as is well argued by the Corinthians in Book 1 of Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*. They too consider

launching preemptive strikes against Athens – in the *Histories* in Book 5 (5.92) and in Thucydides at the start of the Peloponnesian War (1.23) – in order to contain Athens’ growing power. Like Croesus, they are careful to consult the Delphic Oracle before any of their military campaigns, and, like him, occasionally misread the results, as happens in Book 1 of the *Histories* in their intended campaign against the Tegeans (1.66).

Herodotus closely links the Spartans and Croesus throughout Book 1. It is common to read that Herodotus composed his *Histories* to warn the Athenians about the dangers of their Empire (Moles 1996) and the idea that he may also be composing it to warn the Spartans (and others) about their hegemony is gaining acceptance (Stadter 2012). Whereas Stadter focuses upon the *hubris* behind both Croesus’ and the Spartans’ actions; my focus is on their slow and cautious natures – a characteristic which can be just as dangerous as the daring aggression of the Persians and the Athenians. As Persia may stand as an analogue for the growth of the Athenian Empire, Lydia under Croesus offers the Spartans an analogue for themselves, or at least a model of how a preexisting Empire may come to an end without carefully considering the implications of an overly-cautious plan of preemptive attack.

#### Bibliography

Moles, J. (1996) “Herodotus Warns the Athenians.” *PLLS* 9.259-284.

Stadter, P. (2012) “Speaking to the Deaf: Herodotus, His Audience, and the Spartans at the Beginning of the Peloponnesian War.” *Histos* 6.1-14.