

From History to Myth: Plutarch's Recasting of Herodotus

At the climax of book 8 in Herodotus' *Histories*, the battle of Salamis, Herodotus presents the Hellenic confederation not only uniting despite past differences, but also competing with each other for honors. Out of the allied Hellenic forces, two *poleis* are recognized for their *aristeia* in battle: the Athenians and Aeginetans. Although Herodotus seems to praise both peoples by casting them in an epinician light, his reader Plutarch in his *de Herodoti Malignitate* objects that the historian intentionally sabotages the Athenians' reputation in favor of the Aeginetans in regards to both the fighting and honors after Salamis. E. Irwin (2011) has proposed that Herodotus portrays this conflict between the Aeginetans and the Athenians as a reversal of the mythical contest of arms between Ajax and Odysseus. This argument hinges on Aegina's association with Ajax as the center of his cult and Athens' connection to Odysseus through the person of Themistocles. But while Aegina's undeniable association with Ajax and his ancestors lies at the *polis*' mythical founding, Herodotus shows that Athens also shares strong connections to the Aeacidae throughout his *Histories* and that the heroes prove reluctant to offer their divine support in the conflict between the two *poleis* (Hdt. 5.55.2). In this context, the presence of Ajax and the Aeacidae at Salamis highlights unity in the pursuit of heroic honors among Hellenes as opposed to persisting hostilities. Because of this, I argue that it is not Herodotus but his critic Plutarch who creates this allusion to the *krisis hoplon* as he recasts Herodotus as a sensational mythologist and his history as fabulous tales.

While most of the sparse scholarship concerning the *de Herodoti Malignitate*, such as C. Pelling (2007), J. P. Hershbell (1997), J.M. Marincola (1994), focuses on the general purposes of Plutarch's essay, little attention has been paid to the specific devices the rhetorician uses to persuade his audience of Herodotus' malicious intent. Despite the fact Plutarch quotes the

Histories directly, the clever rhetorician manipulates the text by truncating the historical narrative and inserting his own commentary. As W. Seavey (1991, 43) states, “Plutarch used every artifice possible to win his readers over: he is unfair, manipulates evidence, distorts, adapts, abridges, and suppresses to suit his case.” Abbreviating the events between the battle and awards of Salamis, Plutarch argues that Herodotus programmatically praises the Aeginetans in order to disparage the Athenians as a whole. Specifically he takes offense with how Herodotus depreciates the reputation for counsel as well as the just honors of Themistocles, whom Plutarch explicitly refers to as “a second Odysseus” (Plut. *dHM* 38, 869f). In an inversion of the *krisis hoplon*, both the Athenians and their general are despoiled of the first fruits of victory by the Aeginetans who are strongly associated with Ajax (Bowie 2007, 213). In addition, Plutarch incorporates a divine counterpart to Athena’s role in the mythical judgment, accusing Herodotus of using Apollo’s verdict to bestow the first fruits of Salamis to the Aeginetans over the Athenians. Plutarch even casts Herodotus as a tragedian or a fabulist rather than a historian because of his tendency to include supernatural elements in his *Histories* (Plut. *dHM* 39, 870c and 40, 871d). Through the scope of Plutarch’s criticism, the distribution of honors after Salamis becomes a clear reversal of the *krisis hoplon*, discrediting Herodotus’ historical account of Hellenic competition at Salamis for Plutarch’s own rhetorical purposes.

Bibliography

Bowie, A. M. ed. 2007. *Herodotus: Histories, Book VIII*. Cambridge University.

Hershbell, J. P. 1997. “Plutarch's Concept of History: Philosophy from Examples.” *Ancient Society* 28: 225-243.

- Irwin, E. 2011. "Herodotus on Aeginetan Identity." In *Aegina: contexts for choral lyric poetry*, 373-424. David Fearn, ed. Oxford University Press.
- Marincola, J. M. 1994. "Plutarch's refutation of Herodotus." *The Ancient World* 25: 191-203.
- Pelling, C. 2007. "De Malignitate Plutarchi: Plutarch, Herodotus, and the Persian War." In *Cultural Responses to the Persian Wars*, 145-166. Edith Bridges, Edith Hall and P. J. Rhodes, eds. Blackwell Publishing.
- Seavey, W. 1991. "Forensic Epistolography and Plutarch's *de Herodoti Malignitate*. *Hellas* II: 33-45.