

Social Proxemics and the Persian Court in Herodotus' *Histories*

The primary aim of this analysis is to consider how Herodotus describes Xerxes' manipulation of space in his interpersonal interactions. In the *Histories*, Herodotus characterizes Xerxes as dominating social space by dictating the occupation of social positions for his advisors. The Persian king determines whom he will allow into his various social spheres, or proxemic zones. Xerxes' interactions with and responses to the members of his court characterize the general cultural attitude toward the Persian king within the context of Herodotus' readership.

In his seminal work on social distances in animals and humans, Edward T. Hall qualifies the use of space in social interactions. He states: "Writers, like painters, are often concerned with space. Their success in communicating perception depends upon the use of visual and other clues to convey *different* degrees of closeness. ...great writers perceive and communicate the meaning and uses of distance as a significant cultural factor in interpersonal relations" (Hall 1969: 94, author's emphasis). Hall observed four distances with varying deviations depending on the culture under observation: intimate, personal, social, and public (Hall 1969: 114-125). Donald Lateiner suggests that nonverbal communication characterizes entire social, political, and historical structures, particularly in the *Histories* (Lateiner 1987), but he does not include proxemics in the context of the Persian court specifically in his analysis. We can see in Herodotus' text a general description of social distance with Xerxes in such phrases as: "in the sight (ὄψιν) of the king" (7.6.4), and the king himself (αὐτός) going to speak with the commanders of the ships (8.67.1), and he also watches battles from a distance in order to motivate the troops.

Xerxes listens to slaves, women, and wealthy men, and he makes decisions based not

only on information given by all of these people but also on perceived familiarity and occupation within proxemic levels. For example, Artabanus' contrary opinion irritates Xerxes (7.12.1), and shortly after he is invited to wear Xerxes' clothes and to occupy the throne and bed of the king thereby assuming Xerxes' position (7.15.3), a very intimate gesture and one meant to sway the advisor to see things as Xerxes does. Xerxes' attitude toward Artemisia is also made clear by her increasing proximity to the king. Bowie (2007) notes that she at first speaks through Mardonius (8.68), and later is able to speak with Xerxes face-to-face and alone (8.101.2). Artemisia is able to occupy a closer proxemic zone because of Xerxes' higher regard for her, despite the fact that in the naval battle she attacks a ship on the Persian side in order to avoid her own destruction (8.88.2-3). Xerxes' host, Pythius assumes a greater familiarity than Xerxes allows and is punished by the death and mutilation of his favorite son (7.39), thereby becoming alienated from his most intimate sphere.

In every case, Xerxes has complete control over his proxemic zones, allowing those whose suggestions advance his military conquest and seem selfless, like Artemisia, into the most intimate zone while alienating those who try to preserve themselves or their position, like Pythius. We may interpret this description of Xerxes' control of social space as Herodotus fashioning the Persian king as a domineering and dangerous person to interact with at any social distance. Examining Herodotus' interpretation of the social distance of the advisors to the Persian king offers new insights into the general attitude in the interactions with such a significant historical figure.

Bibliography

Bowie, A. M. 2009. *Herodotus: Histories Book VIII*. Cambridge.

Hall, E. T. 1969. *The Hidden Dimension*. Garden City, NY.

Lateiner, D. 1987. "Nonverbal Communication in the Histories of Herodotus." *Arethusa* 20, 83-

119.