

## First Meetings with Persians in Herodotus' *Histories*

When Aristagoras convinces the Athenians to aid in the Ionian revolt, Herodotus comments, “these twenty ships proved to be the beginning of misfortune for Greeks and non-Greeks equally” (5.97). Herodotus contributes to the narrative that the Athenians’ actions in the Ionian revolt attracted the attention of the Persians and eventually led to the Persian invasions of Greece. Herodotus offers the Athenians some redemption in Book 7, when they choose to act in support of Greece despite the terrifying oracles they have received from Delphi (7.139).

Herodotus introduces his argument with strong truth claims (Munson 2001, 173-175), before arguing that if the Athenians had decided to Medize or flee, Greece would have eventually been subdued by the Persians. The rational course for the Athenians would have been to take up the Persians on their offer of alliance (Baragwanath 2008, 227-231). While Herodotus’ redemption of the Athenians does not silence his earlier foreshadowing judgment about the ships, it opens up a space for further consideration of the blame lying upon the Athenians for the Persian invasions.

Before Aristagoras goes to Athens to make his request, he approaches the Spartan king Cleomenes. Cleomenes resists Aristagoras’ arguments. While Cleomenes succeeded in making a wise decision, he is also a figure who involves Sparta in several dubious political and military actions. I want to focus on two of these, involving Athens and Argos, which had an effect on the later interactions of the Persians and the Greeks.

After the Spartans aid the Athenians in ousting the Peisistratids, they become more intimately involved in the political decisions made in Athens during Isagoras’ and Cleisthenes’ the battle for ascendancy. The Spartans back Isagoras, and the Athenians send to Persia for help, since they recognize that they are at war with the Spartans and Cleomenes (5.73.1). The Persians offer the Athenians help in exchange for the gift of earth and water, which the Athenian envoys

agree to. Not much later, the Athenians become aware that Hippias is in Persia and working to stoke up the Persians against Athens. The Athenians send envoys to ask the Persians not to listen to Hippias, and the Persians respond by telling them to take Hippias back. The Athenians then decide to be open enemies against Persia (5.96.2). In both cases, the Athenians are responding to political problems forced upon them by the Spartans, first by their support for Isagoras, and second because of their decision to reinstate Hippias (5.91).

Spartan aggression causes a parallel reaction among the Argives. When the united Greeks send messengers to Argos to join them in their resistance to the Persians, the Argives demure, citing the loss of six thousand men in a recent war with the Spartans and specifically blaming Spartan *pleonexia* (7.149.3) for their unwillingness to take part. Herodotus then provides a number of different accounts of Argos' relationship with Persia, including a first meeting with envoys of Xerxes, who cite the relationship between the Persians and Perseus as a basis for a friendly relationship. Regardless of their relationship with Persia, the Argive response is motivated by their recent problems with Sparta.

The Athenian negotiations with Persia have Spartan aggression and interference as a major proximate cause; the Argives explicitly cite Spartan greed for their neutrality during the Persian invasions. The case for Sparta's aggression or interference goes back even further in the *Histories*, when they have their own first encounter with Persia. This occurs after the fall of Sardis in Book 1. Although an ally of Croesus, the Spartans are unable to assist him in the Persian siege of Sardis. The Ionians, who had been subject to Croesus, seek Spartan aid in their dealings with Cyrus. The Spartans reject their plea, but decide to send an embassy to Cyrus anyway. They forbid Cyrus to harm any city on Greek land (1.152). Cyrus' response is to subtly threaten the Spartans themselves. The Spartans are in this position because they are tied to

Croesus, who chose to ally with them because they had succeeded in subduing their neighbors and become pre-eminent in Greece (1.66ff).

Herodotus has constructed a subtle counter-narrative to the prevailing idea that the Athenians are to blame for the Persian invasions. Sparta, because of its aggressive and imperialistic behavior, drives both its allies and its enemies to turn to Persia.

#### Bibliography

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