

I'll Never Be Your Beast of Burden: Poetic Manifestations of Animals in Herodotus

Though no one who has read Herodotus' *Histories* would seriously deny that it is primarily concerned with human affairs, a close reader will notice that, for a work about "the deeds of men," (1.1.0), it has a very high frequency of animals. Compared to the relative paucity of animals among other Greek historians - Thucydides only references seven different kinds of animals at 42 distinct points - Herodotus furnishes the reader with a veritable menagerie: 804 references to at least 111 different animal terms (Smith 1992). Alongside the developing strife between Greeks and Persians are inquiries concerning all manner of creatures as they relate to the various individuals, peoples and places passing before the historian's' gaze.

Such appearances vary widely in nature, ranging from the mythological story of talking doves at Dodona (2.55-7) to the ecological theory behind why some species are prolific and others not (3.108-9). The many references to animals in the *Histories* fall primarily into one of two categories: an archaic register wherein Herodotus thinks *with* animals and a late fifth-century register wherein Herodotus thinks *about* animals. This paper focuses on the first of these two registers, specifically how and where Herodotus incorporates symbolic usages of animals reminiscent of archaic poetic conventions and how this adaptation aligns with his own style and aims.

As scholarship in the last two decades has convincingly shown, Herodotus, rather than being solely rooted in archaic traditions, actively engages with contemporary political, scientific and philosophical thought (Raaflaub 2002; Thomas 2000). His tendency towards schematization, rationalization, and an interest in causation (*αἰτία*), coupled with his familiarity with specific theories, reflect a close involvement with current intellectual trends. For example, Herodotus' theories on the effects of climate on horn growth among animals in Scythia and Libya (4.29)

strongly resemble those postulated by pre-Socratics like Democritus and Empedocles and Hippocratic texts like *Airs, Waters, Places*. Despite the modernity of much of the work though, Herodotus is also deftly attuned to the affectations of his predecessors. Beyond their appearances in the sections of natural philosophy which construct the physical world of the *Histories*, I argue that animals also play a key role in the narratives Herodotus weaves around his human characters and the way he captures the language and imagery of the archaic world.

Though Herodotus avoids the conventional formulae of poetry like epithets and extended similes in his narration - there are only two animal epithets, ἰχθυόεις and μηλοτρόφος (4.88.2; 4.155.3), and one simile comparing language to bat shrieks (4.183.4) - his writing is not devoid of poetic usages for animals. Cases of animals used in overtly symbolic and suggestive language are found primarily in the mouths of characters or other internal sources. For example, the Spartan king Cleomenes threatens the Aeginetan Krios by calling him a ram (ὦ κριέ) and telling him to cover his horns like a sacrificial victim (6.50.3). By working poetic symbolism into reported speech, Herodotus incorporates the language and imagery associated with the archaic Greek world into his characters. Simply put, the metaphors and tropes used by the figures in Herodotus' archaic world belong to the poetic tradition of that period.

The lion's share of metaphorical animals in Herodotus occur in prophetic signs throughout his narrative: oracles, dreams, and portents (τέρατα). In addition to often being conveyed in the meter and language of poetry, the prophecies Herodotus reports, like in epic and tragedy, provide semiotic clues which characters must decipher. Though characters may fail to interpret a prophecy, such as Croesus in the case of the oracle of the mule ruling the Medes (1.55.2), the implications of the animals in these prophecies - which people or characteristics they represent - are often readily grasped. In total, fifteen such cases occur in the *Histories*. Lions

in particular, much like in the *Iliad*, commonly appear in reference to powerful leaders or tyrants, such as Pericles (6.131.2), Cypselus (5.92β.3) and Leonidas (7.220.4). Herodotus' world is one steeped in metaphor and symbolism and thus the narratives set in this archaic past tap into this tradition. In this world, animals play a key role as semiotic carriers, and the players on that stage, especially the fortunate and capable ones, are quick to recognize and properly interpret them as such.

Bibliography

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