

Herodotus *Homerikōteros*: The Greek Embassy to Gelon (*Hist.* 7.153-67) and *Iliad* 9

The author of *On the Sublime* famously applied the superlative appellation “most Homeric” (Ὀμηρικώτατος, 13.3) to Herodotus first and foremost among Greek writers. This paper makes a claim that is more modest by one adjectival degree: I will argue that Herodotus is (significantly) “more Homeric” than previous scholars have recognized in his dramatization of the Greek embassy dispatched in 480 BCE to seek the support of Gelon, tyrant of Syracuse, against the Persian invasion led by King Xerxes (7.153-67). Beyond the Homeric allusions in the episode discussed by Grethlein (2006), Pelling (2006), and others, I suggest that Herodotus evokes as a specific intertext the embassy sent to Achilles by Agamemnon in *Iliad* 9, which also attempts to persuade an incomparably powerful ally to take the field against an imposing Eastern enemy. This narrative strategy underscores Herodotus’ framing of the war against Xerxes as a latter-day version of the Trojan War; emphasizes the unlikeliness and enormity of the Greeks’ victory, achieved without the aid of the peerless Gelon; and demonstrates the importance of ethnic and communal (rather than personal) identity in the context of Greek politics both during and after the Persian War.

The most conspicuous Homeric features of the Herodotean episode are statements made by Greek ambassadors in response to speeches by Gelon. The Spartan ambassador Syagros answers Gelon’s request for sole command over all Hellenic forces by recasting Nestor’s emotional critique of Achaean cowardice at Troy (7.159.1, cf. *Il.* 7.125); subsequently, the unnamed Athenian ambassador rejects the possibility of Gelon’s commanding the Greek fleet by citing Homer’s praise of the Athenian hero Menestheus in the Catalogue of Ships (7.161.3, cf. *Il.* 2.552-4). More broadly, Herodotus’ decision to dramatize the embassy proper (7.157-62) as a series of speeches amplifies the Homeric resonance of the episode. Moreover, his decision to

stage the embassy as a sequence of six speeches in three matched pairs evokes one of the most memorable scenes of the *Iliad*: for just as the Homeric Achilles responds in turn to entreaties from Odysseus, Phoenix, and Ajax to return to the battlefield, so too the Herodotean Gelon responds in turn to requests by anonymous Hellenic ambassadors, the Spartan speaker Syagros, and the Athenian ambassador that he join the Greek alliance against Xerxes.

Both Achilles and Gelon are approached at a time of military crisis: Achilles after Hector has turned the tide of battle against the Achaeans in book 8; Gelon when Hellenes convening at the Isthmus of Corinth believed that, with Xerxes on the march, “fearful tribulations were advancing upon all Greeks alike” (7.145.2). The might of Achilles, the greatest Greek warrior at Troy, is indispensable to the Greek cause; the resources of Gelon are no less formidable, said to be “greater by far than those of all other Greeks” (7.145.2)—a claim supported by his outlandish promise to provide as commander-in-chief 200 triremes, 20,000 hoplites, 2,000 horsemen, 2,000 archers, 2,000 men with slings, and 2,000 light-armed horsemen, as well as grain for the entire army for the duration of the campaign. As prelude to this promise Gelon also strikes a distinctly Achillean note by elaborating upon the dishonor (ἀτιμίας, 7.158.4) he endured when the Greeks refused his previous request for military support against the foreign threat posed by the Carthaginians. An obvious and crucial difference lies in the divergent final decisions rendered by Achilles and Gelon: the former spells out conditions under which he will return to the battlefield (Hector’s burning of Achaean ships), while the latter definitively refuses to join the Greek alliance since he has been denied a share of the military command.

A more fundamental discrepancy between the Homeric and Herodotean scenarios is the extent to which the personal has become the political in the transition from the heroic age to the fifth century. While the grievance between Achilles and Agamemnon is a matter of personal

enmity, in Gelon's court the point of dispute concerns ethnic identity. The ambassadors appeal to the tyrant as a fellow Hellene whose own interests are implicated in the looming battle against Persian *barbaroi*; however, Herodotus' previous description of Gelon's rise to power (7.153-6) has portrayed him as an authoritarian ruler with a history of repressing the civic freedoms of fellow Greeks in Sicilian colonies. Moreover, the speeches delivered by the Spartan and Athenian ambassadors include discernible signs of discord between their respective communities, heralding intra-Hellenic conflict not only during the battle with Xerxes to come but in its aftermath as well, with far-reaching consequences for Herodotus' contemporary audience.

#### Bibliography

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