

From Adrastus to Durkheim: Toward a Coherent Evaluation of Suicide Triggers in Herodotus

In this paper, I introduce a new method for reading the accounts of suicide present in Herodotus' *Histories*. Scholarship of recent decades has attempted to broadly examine the issue of Greek cultural attitudes toward suicide. In this pursuit, Elise Garrison's *Attitudes toward suicide in ancient Greece*, and Anton van Hooff's art-historical *The Image of Ancient Suicide* stand as prominent examples. In Herodotean scholarship however, little work has been undertaken to examine his depictions of suicide. The instances of suicide which he recounts are numerous enough to merit investigation and comparison, yet few enough to be investigated individually. The most direct recent examination into this issue has been conducted not in the realm of Classics but of Psychiatry, with the aim of demonstrating that suicide triggers known to modern psychology were known and recognized in classical Greek society as well (Pridmore, Saxby, Stephane Auchincloss, and Jamshid Ahmadi 2016: 128 -132). This study is limited however, by its brevity and genre, which seeks merely to introduce a set of data into modern discourse. It is the purpose of this paper to offer an assessment of Herodotus' depiction of suicide by applying the tools of sociology and psychology to the text.

The first part of this paper lays the groundwork for the inquiry by establishing the mode of classification which will be used, and establishing a compatible Greek vocabulary. For terminology and typology appropriate to the analysis of suicide, I rely on Emile Durkheim's pivotal *Le Suicide*, and its subsequent elaborations. Suicide is understood by Durkheim as a phenomenon not totally explainable either by "the organic-psychic constitution of individuals nor the nature of the physical environment" and "must necessarily depend upon social causes and be in itself a collective phenomenon" (Durkheim 1951: 145). The social causes which he postulates are divided into situations of personal integration into society, and regulation of

society upon the individual. The lack or excess of these provide the impetus for suicide: Egoistic and Altruistic respectively. The factors of integration and regulation can be understood by the Greek terms *φιλία*, and *δίκη*, respectively. *φιλία* is used to describe relations between equals (as in Hdt. 7. 130), between family members (Aristotle, *Poetics* 1453B19), between social superiors and inferiors (Isocrates 16.28) between nations (Thucydides 5.5) or between communities (Isocrates 6.11). *δίκη*, on the other hand, consists in a broad sense of order and abstract justice, often expressed in divine or religious terms. The categories established by Durkheim provide a valuable outline against which to measure Herodotus' specific accounts.

The second part of this paper consists in a close reading of individual instances of suicide recorded by Herodotus, putting each in comparison with models proposed by Durkheim. I will focus on the descriptions of the suicides of Adrastus (1.45), Othrayades (1.83), and Cleomenes (6.75), which, due to vividness of presentation, provide ready material for examination. By applying the tools of Durkheim's sociological approach to these ancient accounts, I will identify the interplay of *φιλία* and *δίκη* in the motivations which Herodotus supplies for the suicides he depicts. In this way, I will demonstrate the coherent psychology of suicide which characterizes Herodotus' accounts; a coherence which strengthens Herodotus position as a narrator rather than inventor of the events of his *Histories*.

In the last part of my paper, I will draw some conclusions from my analysis, which I will situate within the wider context of contemporary Greek society. The treatment of suicide in Greek literature presents no clear model of societal attitudes toward suicide and is often highly circumstantial (van Hooff 1998: 48-69). Nevertheless, the cultural reception of self-destructive acts shows a general attitude of pity rather than judgement upon the deceased, which is mirrored in Herodotus' accounts. Close readings of Herodotus through the lens of Durkheim's

formulations allows us to see a congruence between psychological classifications, contemporary Greek attitudes, and Herodotus's own accounts which speaks not only to the enduring and seldom changing nature of suicide as a phenomenon in human society, but also to the historical value of Herodotus' accounts, which correspond well to contemporary views, artistic depiction, and sociological principles.

Bibliography

Durkheim, Emile. "Suicide: A study in sociology (JA Spaulding & G. Simpson, trans.)."

Glencoe, IL: Free Press. (Original work published 1897) (1951).

Garrison, Elise P. "Attitudes toward suicide in ancient Greece." *Transactions of the American Philological Association* (1974-) 121 (1991): 1-34.

Pridmore, Saxby, Stephane Auchincloss, and Jamshid Ahmadi. "Suicide triggers described by Herodotus." *Iranian journal of psychiatry* 11, no. 2 (2016): 128.

van Hooff, Anton JL. "The image of ancient suicide." *Syllecta Classica* 9, no. 1 (1998): 48-69.