

## Correcting Herodotus 1.56: The *Histories*' Non-answer to the Pelasgian Question

The “Pelasgian Question” - who they were, where they lived or immigrated, to whom they are related, whether they existed at all - is one that eludes any definite answer, even when confined to historiography. One point of clarity has often been found in Herodotus, specifically in 1.56, when he says that the Athenians and Ionians descend from the Pelasgians. However, this reading does not conform to the grammar, nor to the context of the work as a whole. Herodotus is not saying that the Athenians or the Ionians come from Pelasgian stock, at least not in this passage, but rather that the Dorian Spartans do. I do not assert that Herodotus consistently argues that the Spartans are descended from Pelasgians or that the Athenians are not. Rather, I argue that modern scholars demand more clarity on questions of ethnicity than Herodotus cares to provide.

My updated translation of *Histories* 1.56 looks to the simple grammar, and does not require a reversal of the second and third sets of  $\mu\acute{\epsilon}\nu$ - $\delta\grave{\epsilon}$  clauses from the associations tied to the first set. Croesus's investigation revealed that the Lacedaemonians were the most prominent of the Doric race ( $\tau\omicron\upsilon\delta\grave{\epsilon}\ \mu\acute{\epsilon}\nu$ ) and the Athenians the most prominent of the Ionian ( $\tau\omicron\upsilon\delta\grave{\epsilon}\ \delta\grave{\epsilon}$ ); further, the one race ( $\tau\omicron\ \mu\acute{\epsilon}\nu$ ) was originally Pelasgian, the other ( $\tau\omicron\ \delta\grave{\epsilon}$ ) Hellenic, and that the one ( $\tau\omicron\ \mu\acute{\epsilon}\nu$ ) never left their home, but the other ( $\tau\omicron\ \delta\grave{\epsilon}$ ) traveled widely. Scholars switch the second two sets of clauses reflexively based on what they believe Herodotus must have meant logically, and for the most part eschew any grammatical rationale. Among the exceptions, C.P. Jones dissects the grammar in some respects, but justifies the shift in clauses by asserting that one of the phrases “could hardly refer to the Pelasgians by contrast with the Hellenes, but well suits the Athenians contrasted with the Spartans” (Jones 1996). R.A. McNeal alone uses a linguistic rationale to argue for a shift in the  $\mu\acute{\epsilon}\nu$ - $\delta\grave{\epsilon}$  correlation, saying that it is that it is reflective of a

chiasmic structure (McNeal 1985), but such a structure would still require the reader's understanding of the content to be already so clear that he recognizes that a shift is necessary.

However, Herodotus is nowhere less clear than on this question, and so the notion that he must have meant anything is without sufficient basis, especially enough to change the clear language. There is no consensus among Greek authors before or after Herodotus about the Pelasgian question, and so the historian cannot rest his assertion on previous understanding, nor do later historians take his cue. Moreover, Herodotus himself provides no definitive judgement on the question before or after this passage. This study investigates every mention of the Pelasgians in the *Histories* with special focus on the criteria in 1.56, and finds that Herodotus is so vague and inconsistent that we must conclude that he had no real interest in the Pelasgian Question. Or rather, his interest is not sufficient to satisfy modern demands, and we must not correct his plain language in order to make it conform to clarity that does not exist.

#### Bibliography

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McNeal, R. A. "How did Pelasgians Become Hellenes? Herodotus I. 56—58." *Illinois Classical Studies* 10.1 (1985): 11-21.