

Herodotus' Constitutional Debate and the Spread of *Isonomia*

Herodotus' depiction of the Constitutional Debate in Persia prior to the ascension of Darius in Book 3 (3.80-83) has been questioned by scholars both for its location of apparent fifth-century Greek political language in sixth-century Persia and for its seeming lack of connection to the surrounding narrative, as radical political concepts such as *isonomia* are strikingly introduced only to be immediately obscured by the resumption of the Persian monarchy (e.g. Connor 1971; Pelling 2002). By examining subsequent passages in which Herodotus discusses *isonomia*, my paper shows that the introduction of this concept in the Constitutional Debate forms an integral part of Herodotus' narrative, as *isonomia* spreads from the Persian court to Greek Ionia.

The term *isonomia* occurs four times in the text of Herodotus. While the first two (3.80.2 and 3.83.1) occur during the Constitutional Debate, Herodotus next uses the term during the insurrection on Samos when Maeandrius proposes to relinquish his power, absolve the tyranny, and establish *isonomia* (3.142.2-3). As previous scholars have noted (Immerwahr 1957; Raaflaub 2004), the language attributed to Maeandrius during this episode recalls the speech of Otanes in the Constitutional Debate. But the significance of this apparent allusion to Otanes' speech and the role of *isonomia* here has not been fully explored. Herodotus' inclusion of Darius' decision to send the same Otanes to Samos to deal with the insurrection further emphasizes the connection between the two passages. The surprising appearance of Otanes creates the impression that *isonomia* has spread from Persia to Samos along with him. There is, however, an important rhetorical shift here, as Maeandrius associates *isonomia* directly with the concept of freedom, a slogan previously employed by Darius in defense of tyranny (3.82.5; Raaflaub 2004). Ultimately,

Maeandrius failed in this attempt; as Herodotus puts it, the Samians “did not wish to be free” (3.143.2).

The only other instance of the term *isonomia* in Herodotus occurs in his account of the Ionian Revolt in Book 5. There, Herodotus claims that the revolt was instigated by Aristagoras of Miletus, who, just as Maeandrius had attempted to do previously in Samos, abandoned his claim to the tyranny of Miletus and established *isonomia* there and throughout Ionia (5.37.2). Although this revolt ultimately failed as well, Aristagoras finds more willing recipients of his proposals than either Otanes or Maeandrius. The resulting insurrection by the Ionians against Darius clearly holds much greater significance in Herodotus’ narrative. Nevertheless, unlike in the previous two passages where the concept of *isonomia* was more fully explained, Herodotus offers no further comment on the reforms of Aristagoras. The previous passages, however, enable us to understand the full implications in Herodotus’ narrative of this attempt to establish *isonomia*. Although it originated in Persia, the concept has become associated in Ionia with the idea of freedom. This meant little in the case of Samos, where it was immediately rejected, but it means a great deal now when the mantle of freedom leads Ionia into revolt.

In the end, however, it is not a Greek who brings democracy to Ionia but Mardonius, the leader of Darius’ expedition against Greece (6.43.3). This irony is emphasized by Herodotus here, as he makes a direct connection between the institution of democracy in Ionia by a Persian and the arguments in favor of democracy presented by Otanes in the Constitutional Debate. A further irony emerges from this passage, however, since, at the precise moment that Herodotus chooses to make explicit this connection which he had previously only implied, he also seems to confuse the matter by re-labeling the proposal of Otanes as democracy (*δημοκρατέεσθαι*, 6.43.3) instead of *isonomia*. Close attention to Herodotus’ treatment of *isonomia* throughout these

passages offers an explanation for this shift. The previous attempts at popular reform in Ionia had failed. With no resulting government to analyze, the term ‘democracy’ becomes too specific. *Isonomia*, on the other hand, represents a much broader and more applicable concept (Ostwald 1969; Pelling 2002). But why does Herodotus not have Otanes use the term ‘democracy’ in the first place? By choosing the term *isonomia* in the Constitutional Debate, Herodotus draws a connection between this debate in Persia and the subsequent actions of Maeandrius and Aristagoras in Ionia. This is important for establishing not just the spread of *isonomia* from Persia to Ionia but also in marking the revolutionary association with freedom that it found there.

Bibliography

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