

Herodotus' Last Word on Themistocles

In his last significant treatment of Themistocles, Herodotus allows the otherwise unknown Timodemus to chastise the victor of Salamis for the exceptional honors he was recently awarded by the Spartans, honors that he claims properly belong to the Athenian people (8.125). Themistocles famously retorts, "true; if I were from Belbina, I would not have been honored by the Spartans as I was, but neither would you, my good man, even though you are an Athenian." On the surface Themistocles outwits a hapless rube (Hart 1982: 150, Jordan 1988: 556-57, and Blösel 2004: 329-31), and thoughts have naturally flown to Homer's Thersites (*Il.* 2.211-277; Blösel 2004: 330 and Bowie 2007: 215). But I argue that this is not a one-dimensional anecdote intended merely to prompt Themistocles, *qua* Odysseus, to silence the upstart Timodemus with a memorable *bon mot*. The attack on Themistocles is not without merit. He is rightly reminded that he had not won the battle alone, but had served merely as a representative of the polis. Witty riposte aside, even Themistocles must acknowledge the justice of this pointed observation. Nor is Timodemus ill placed to deliver it. As Herodotus is careful to note, he was "not one of the prominent men." Thersites may come to mind, but this is not Homer. This is democratic Athens, and there a criticism from the middle carries more weight. Even Timodemus' name, which could be rendered "one who honors the people" (Asheri et al. 2003: 326), underscores the serious tensions that set Themistocles up for his quip, tensions between the great general's panhellenic ambitions and Timodemus' narrower, civic sensibilities.

Herodotus' presentation of Themistocles immediately before his altercation with Timodemus gives us additional reason to read their exchange in the light of these broader tensions between panhellenism and parochialism. His trip to Sparta is merely the last in a string

of abuses Herodotus relates between the Salamis narrative and the Timodemus episode (Ferrario 2014: 98-101). Themistocles deceives his fellow Athenians (8.108-109), seeks credit from Xerxes (8.110), extorts money from the islanders (8.111-12), and finally pursues international acclaim at Sparta (8.123-24). All feature Themistocles exceeding the constraints imposed by his home polis. This is, of course, not the only point Herodotus hopes to make here. The Athenian general remains throughout the archetypal rogue and trickster whose unprincipled conduct anticipates criticisms of the future Athenian Empire (Fornara 1971: 70-74, Dewald 1985: 53-55, Evans 1991: 78-80, and Blösel 2004: 255-335). But in each case, Themistocles tricks, cheats, and generally misbehaves by leveraging the prestige and influence he had gained within the Hellenic League. In so doing, Herodotus adds historical depth to Timodemus' rebuke of Themistocles' panhellenic ambitions.

The importance of panhellenism and parochialism here falls into particularly sharp relief if we compare Herodotus' version to another that appears in Plato (*Rep.* 329e-330a) and elsewhere (Cic. *Cato* 8 and Plut. *Them.* 18.3). There Herodotus' middling Athenian is removed along with his significant name and replaced by an unnamed foreigner. Gone too is Themistocles' trip to Sparta and his desire for international acclaim. Themistocles remains the clever, albeit obnoxious, aristocrat, but the tensions between panhellenism and parochialism that had animated the episode in Herodotus are absent. At the very least we can say that Herodotus saw in this exchange something others did not. But if Plato's version is the older (as Blösel 2004: 329-30 suggests), we might go even further and conclude that Herodotus has gone out of his way to insert these tensions into an anecdote that did not originally have it. In either case, Herodotus has used his final treatment of Themistocles to foreshadow the very real problems of reintegrating the great leaders of the Hellenic League back into the parochial world of the polis.

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