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Dossier:

## Serments et paroles efficaces



ÉDITIONS DE L'EHES • DAEDALUS  
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### DEMOCRACY : A PERSIAN INVENTION ?

Susa, 522 BCE, end of September, in the royal palace. Seven Persians, from the best families of the Empire, have just put to death a sinister impostor, who had seized the throne, by pretending to be a man recently murdered — a brother of King Cambyses, called Smerdis. Cambyses is now dead; Smerdis and his counterfeit are also dead. The normal transmission of power is suspended. The future is open-ended. Change seems to be possible — and without a revolution. The seven noblemen are holding a meeting, to discuss that possibility<sup>1</sup>.

The first to speak is the man who has initiated the uprising against the false Smerdis : Otanes, son of Pharnaspes, « one of the wealthiest members of the Persian nobility »<sup>2</sup>. Since his daughter was married to Smerdis (the real one), he is even part of the royal family : a true *aristos*. Now, Otanes makes the most audacious suggestion. Monarchy is not pleasant or good, he claims. Since a single ruler is submitted to no public examination, the people have to endure the arrogance, indiscriminate anger and envy, inherent in his unchecked supremacy. A monarch disrupts the laws, takes women by force, and puts men to death without trial. The only alternative option is the rule of the majority, *plêthos*, which entails, first of all, that beautiful name, equality before the law, *isonomia*. In such a *politeia*, nobody can exert an unwarranted and arbitrary domination. Magistrates are chosen by lot and must give account of their doing. All issues are examined in public.

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1. Herodotus, 3, 80-82.

2. Herodotus, 3, 68.

Otanes' criticism of monarchy points to its irresponsibility: this is, above all, an unrestrained form of sovereignty, doomed to corrupt the passions of the man who comes to hold it. Once in charge, even the best of all men will set himself above the law, fail to abide by it, and refuse to grant the exercise of justice. Power is thus monopolized, absorbed, embodied, as the unlimited attribute of one person. The culmination of such a monopoly is sexual aggressiveness, contempt for other men's honor and the use of women's bodies for pleasure.

In contrast, this Persian theorist of the rule of the many praises the three aspects usually associated<sup>3</sup>, in Greece, with *dēmokratia*: firstly, justice is regularly administered and respected. The law ought to be the same for all. Second, tight limitations are imposed upon the executive. Access to office is assured by elections at random, and magistrates are subjects to examination. Third, all the adult free-born male citizens can participate in the decision making process, which relies on the majority. Justice commands equality. Government requires answerability. Authority is a service, a role that you play, for a limited period of time, with the consent of the people (who have either voted for you or accepted a selection by lot) and for the sake of everybody else. *Hubris*, the intrinsic offensiveness of the despotic ruler is contrasted with justice, — the self-controlled interaction with others, of the democratic magistrate.

After Otanes, and his praise of democracy, it is now the turn of Megabyzos, who highlights, with great polemical verve, the merits of an oligarchy. Nothing is more stupid and arrogant than a mob, he objects. One despot is indeed insolent, but at least he knows what he is doing. When the people are in charge it is much worse: the many are not only hubristic, they are also ignorant and mindless. The crowd itself becomes a tyrant, and the worst of all. The best possible option for the Empire is the rule of a few, excellent men, the *aristoi* of whom the small deliberating group offers, of course, the finest sample. Megabyzos shares the same social status as his interlocutors, and speaks from that standpoint, in tune with aristocratic self-interest. The seven, he reckons, will be included in the governing elite.

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3. E. HARRIS, « Pericles' Praise of Athenian Democracy, Thucydides, 2.37.1 », *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 94, 1992, p. 157-167. On the controversial connections between popular rule, as it is seen by Otanes, and Athenian democracy, see: Patrick BRANNAN, « Herodotus and History: The Constitutional Debate Preceding Darius' Accession », *Traditio* 19, 1963, p. 427-438; Klaus BRINGMANN, « Die Verfassungsdebatte bei Herodot 3, 80-82 und Dareios' Aufstieg zur Königsherrschaft », *Hermes* 104, 1976, p. 266-279.

The last to intervene is Darius, son of Hystaspes, the governor of Persia, who had joined the group later, but had immediately imposed his will. Against Otanes' advise to take time for deliberation, he had urged his acolytes to act promptly<sup>4</sup>, and is now credited for the success of the operation. Darius casts himself as a natural leader, and speaks accordingly. Nothing is better than one man, he proclaims, if he is truly the very best one. Good character and good judgment can be achieved at the highest possible level, by one person. Only the most accomplished individual must hold power, obviously not the despicable *polloi*, and certainly not the more or less excellent *aristoi* either. If we look at aristocracy, Darius insists, all we see are constant quarrels among the few because, being comparably good, they compete with each other for the first place. From factions comes civil war, from civil war the rule of one. Democracy, on the contrary, is purely and simply bad government, because the people are irrational and incompetent, made worst by their gregarious solidarity. Someone always emerges as a leader; the masses will admire him and accept him as a sole ruler. Monarchy, Darius argues, is the most desirable political option, for three reasons: out of a logical necessity, because the superlative has to be unique; because it is the inevitable destiny of any other regime; because it fits Persian traditions. It is a monarch, Cyrus the Great, who secured the liberty of the Persians from the Medes.

With the recollection of this momentous feat, that took place in 549 BCE, the debate comes to an end. Of the seven noblemen, those who did not speak up are persuaded by the conservative allocution of Darius, thus vote in favor of the government of one. Otanes withdraws from the race (and from any future involvement in royal power). Six out of the seven grandees are the self-nominated candidates to the position of King. It is now time to select the very best man, the one uniquely worthy of governing the Empire. And such a supremely elitist appointment, the noble Persians decide, will be made by chance. Will become king the man whose horse will neigh first, the following morning, after the sun rises. As the reader might suspect, Darius intends to be the winner — and he will.

If we accept its dramatic date, 522 BCE, this scene offers the first example of a comparative definition of monarchy, oligarchy and democracy<sup>5</sup>. It offers, even more strikingly, the very first description of the government of the many — a novel political order that will eventually be called a

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4. Herodotus, 3, 71-72.

5. The first textual allusion to the three forms of government can be found in Pindar, *Pythian* 2, 86-88.

democracy. The power of the people, this quintessentially Hellenic thing, was then a Persian invention, an idea that occurred originally not to the masses of a *polis*, not to an Athenian demagogue, but to a relative of the Great King<sup>6</sup>.

This Persian conversation is strategically staged in Book 3 of Herodotus' *Histories*, when the historian is still examining the remote causes of the ancient enmity between Asia and Europe. It is obviously a gem, and a *locus classicus*, in the history of political thought. It opens up the quest for the best possible state — the guiding question of classical political theory. Its interpretation, however, is far from obvious<sup>7</sup>.

« It is difficult, Kenneth Waters wrote, to see exactly why Herodotus should have included this debate — of course he did not invent it *ex nihilo* — unless for the topical interest of its subject amongst his audience »<sup>8</sup>. His audience, of course, was Hellenic. The Greeks, not the Persians, were

6. For a discussion of the origins of democracy, in Greece or elsewhere, see Eric ROBINSON, *The First Democracies. Early Popular Government outside Athens*, Stuttgart, Steiner, 1997.

7. Thomas A. SINCLAIR, *A History of Greek Political Thought*, London, 1951, p. 33-42; H. APPELL, *Die Verfassungsdebatte bei Herodot (3. 80-82)*, Erlangen, PhD Dissertation, 1957, reprint Arno Press, New York, 1979; Jacqueline DE ROMILLY, « Le classement des constitutions d'Hérodote à Aristote », *Revue des Études Grecques* 77, 1959, p. 81-99; Patrick BRANNAN, « Herodotus and History: the Constitutional Debate Preceding Darius Accession », *Tradition* 19, 1963, p. 427-438; Seth BERNADETE, *Herodotus' Inquiries*, The Hague, 1969, p. 85-87; Kenneth WATERS, « Herodotus and Politics », *Greece and Rome* 19 (2<sup>nd</sup> series), 1972, p. 136-150; Francois LASSERRE, « Herodote et Protagoras: le débat sur les constitutions », *Museum Helveticum* 33, 1976, p. 65-84; James Allan EVANS, « Notes on the Debate of the Persian Grandees in Herodotus 3.80-82 », *Quaderni Urbinati di Cultura Classica* 36, 1981, p. 79-84; Donald LATEINER, « Herodotean Historiographical Patterning: the Constitutional Debate », *Quaderni di Storia* 20, 1984, p. 257-284; *Idem*, *The Historical Method of Herodotus*, Toronto, 1989, ch. 8; John GAMMIE, « Herodotus on Kings and Tyrants: Objective Historiography or Conventional Portraiture? », *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 45, 1986, p. 171-195; Kurt RAAFLAUB, « Contemporary Perceptions of Democracy in Fifth Century Athens », *Classica et Mediaevalia* 40, 1989, p. 33-70; Richard MYERS, « La démocratie chez Hérodote: une étude du Débat sur les régimes », *Canadian Journal of Political Science/Revue Canadienne de Science Politique* 24, 1991, p. 541-555; Norma THOMPSON, *Herodotus and the Origins of the Political Community: Arion's Leap*, Yale UP, 1996, p. 52-78; Susan Sara MONOSON, *Plato's Democratic Entanglements: Athenian Politics and the Practice of Philosophy*, Princeton UP, 2000, p. 33-35; Christopher PELLING, « Speech and Action: Herodotus' Debate on the Constitutions », *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* 48, 2002, p. 123-158; Pierre FRÖHLICH, *Les cités grecques et le contrôle des magistrats (IV-<sup>er</sup> siècles av. J.-C.)*, (2000), Genève, Droz, 2004, p. 15-20.

8. Kenneth WATERS, « Herodotus and Politics », *Greece and Rome* 19 (2<sup>nd</sup> series), 1972, p. 136-150, quotation, p. 141.

interested in comparative politics, the historian caters to *them*. In making this minimalist conjecture, Waters denied Herodotus' commitment to democracy (or any other form of government). Keen on pinning down authorial intentions, Richard Myers later argued that Herodotus intended to stage a miniature democracy, a democracy at work in the debate itself, only to show that a wise collective deliberation had to end with the choice of an enlightened king. Herodotus, Myers argued, used this clever scenario in order to convey his reservations on direct, popular rule<sup>9</sup>. In a thoughtful synthesis of previous scholarship, from Helmut Apffel's dissertation (1957) on, John Gammie offered a nuanced reconsideration of the debate, as a dramatic framework in which Herodotus could sketch an exemplary portrait. Otanes delineates here the « stock characteristics » of the monarch, a recurrent figure in the *Histories*, to be declined as either king or tyrant, in a myriad incarnations (fifty odd being *Greek tyrants*)<sup>10</sup>. Otanes therefore would be the real protagonist of the trio, and his aria, so to speak, would convey an all important way of thinking: that of Herodotus, not on democracy, but on the conventional pattern of monarchy, be it Persian or Greek. In what represents the most ambitious attempt to capture the intellectual and literary significance of the dialogue, Christopher Pelling has argued that its role is to compare Persians and Greeks, by highlighting the allegiance of the formers to monarchy. Otanes' democracy is but a « polarizing foil » for tyranny. Because tyranny is also so Greek, however, the debate resonates with a number of stories about Greek tyrants, especially in Samos<sup>11</sup>.

This is just a homeopathic sample from a vast, polyphonic reception. Most scholarly approaches have focused on the historicity of the debate. Did it really take place? Does it square with Persian sources, namely the Bisitun inscription, in which Darius prides himself for having reestablished dynastic continuity? Or, does it merely reflect Greek political theory? And how does it fit Athenian democracy? A concern for the textual connection of the scene with the larger picture of the *Histories*, has emerged in the contributions of John Gammie and Christopher Pelling. This line of argument allows for a sophisticated interpretation, always attentive to the

9. Richard MYERS, « La démocratie chez Hérodote : une étude du Débat sur les régimes », *Canadian Journal of Political Science/Revue Canadienne de Science Politique* 24, 1991, p. 541-555.

10. John GAMMIE, « Herodotus on Kings and Tyrants: Objective Historiography or Conventional Portraiture? », *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 45, 1986, p. 171-195.

11. Christopher PELLING, « Speech and Action: Herodotus' Debate on the Constitutions », *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* 48, 2002, p. 123-158.

context and never dismissive or schematic, but I would like to go even further in the same direction.

The Persian grandees convene at a critical moment, in Herodotus' display of the great deeds by Barbarians and Hellenes — a display that develops diachronically, in a narration. We need a « time-sensitive » reading, therefore, which acknowledges the Persian conversation, neither as a token of Herodotus' politics nor as a literary digression, but as a momentous episode in a temporal perspective — before the acts and events that will follow<sup>12</sup>. Aware of the narrative texture of the *Histories*, we should listen to the authorial narrator when he warns us (not once, but twice)<sup>13</sup> that we should not distrust his account of the debate. This improbable *terzettino* is such an unconventional piece that — were we Greeks, or should we reason like certain short-sighted Greeks — we would not believe it ever happened. If we comply, however, we can become the kind of unprovincial readers Herodotus wishes for his *historiê*, as an inquiry that aims at thinking cultural diversity, through space and time, travel and change. We also have a chance of not losing sight of the unifying master narrative: this is a war that started as a predictable imperial invasion, but ended abruptly, and most unexpectedly. A super-power, confident on an easy success, lost to a shaky coalition of small city-states.

In the storyline, there is a pivotal moment: Salamis. When we come to that disastrous wreckage, in 480 BCE and in Book 8, we finally understand that the Great King, Xerxes, is not just losing a few battles: he has utterly failed in his attempt to conquer Europe. So much so that now he has to change his plans, turn his back on Greece, and hastily sail home — once and forever. His failure, we now realize, is due to the emerging leadership of a *polis*, which happens to lie at the antipodes of the Empire, politically. It is a *polis* where the many govern themselves. It is a *polis* where Otanes' alleged absurdities make sense; where *to plêthos*, *to polu* is actually in charge and, *pace* Darius and Megabyzos, they seem to know what they

12. This will not be, technically, a narratological interpretation of the *Histories*, such as those of Carolyn DEWALD, « The Figured Stage: Focalizing the Initial Narratives of Herodotus and Thucydides », in Thomas FAULKNER, Nancy FELSON, David KONSTAN, *Contextualizing Classics: Ideology, Performance, Dialogue: Essays in Honor of John J. Peradotto*, Lanhan, 1999; Jonas GRETHLEIN, « Philosophical and Structuralists Narratologies: Worlds Apart? », in Jonas GRETHLEIN and Antonios RENGAKOS (ed.), *Narratology and Interpretation*, Berlin, 2009, p. 153-176, especially p. 160-164, or Tim ROOD, « Herodotus », in Irene DE JONG and Rene NUNLIST (ed.), *Time in Ancient Greek Literature*, Leiden, 2007, p. 115-130.

13. Herodotus, 3, 80 and 6, 43.

are doing. I suggest, in sum, that we take the recommendation Solon gives to Croesus in Book 1, as an advice to us, the readers. Solon had warned the king of Lydia that we cannot assess human vicissitudes, except after they have become past. « Look to the end, no matter what it is that you are considering! »<sup>14</sup>. Solon's wisdom could not really help Croesus at that point, it was too late, but they fit Herodotus' text. As a ramified and multilayered plot, the *Histories* display the operation of time, the constant metamorphosis of the world, until a moment of pause, when all this chaos becomes past — and can be understood *après-coup*. Let us look at the end! The beginning of the end is Salamis, that surprising turning point.

Let us place ourselves in the mnemonic perspective of the fifth century audience of the *Histories* (Athenian or Pan-Hellenic), who are supposed to be able to remember the invasion, from the Artemision to the final victory of the Greek forces at Plataea. In retrospect, the Persian dialogue is likely to have created a moment of indeterminacy, when the subsequent events might have taken a very different turn. Look how the Persians — Herodotus is telling his audience, circa fifty years after Salamis, but ninety years after the dramatic date of the dialogue — look how the Persians, in that memorable day of September 522 BCE, could come so close to rethinking their Empire! It is hard to believe, I grant you, but they did it! And they did it, long before the Athenians themselves converted to democracy with Cleisthenes' reforms, in 509 BCE. The Persians, Herodotus tells us, went so far as to contemplate all the options we know are available in government — one, a few, the many — but then ended up re-choosing the same rule, the one that has brought them to their undoing.

From the vantage point of Salamis, therefore, the flash-back on Susa in that remote day of 522 BCE, comes across as a counterfactual meditation on history and political thought. Look how the Persians, the text is hinting in Book 3, are missing the opportunity of experimenting democracy and prefer, instead, to be ruled by yet another king. After this instant of suspense, literally a *dramatic* date, what follows are the massive consequences of that decision: the ambitions of Darius and his successor, Xerxes, will lead the Empire to wage — and lose — a war against a disproportionately inferior but formidable coalition, finally lead by a general from Athens.

In the geopolitical casting of the *Histories*, Athens plays the role of the democratic *polis*. It is the process of democratization, Herodotus will soon argue in Book 5, that is responsible for the military capability of the Athenians. Their success in the straits of Salamis, the text will tell us,

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14. Herodotus, 1, 32.



is a consequence of that might. In the course of the narrative, therefore, democracy will prove to be a unique form of government: the winning one. The *Histories* take up the challenge of recounting, and accounting for, a most improbable defeat, and for an even less foreseeable victory. The text does so not by preaching a morality of self-knowledge and self-control, but by exposing the realistic effects of different political orders. Against the odds, democracy enhances and strengthens a small *polis*, making it powerful. Notwithstanding its immeasurable resources, monarchy fails. A theatrical pause, in the narration of how the Great Kings came to prepare their campaigns against Greece, the debate offers an explanation to historical events, in terms of political theory.

This is, I will argue, the effect of the scene on the *Histories*.

#### *The point of democracy*

This reading moves from the emphasis that most scholarship placed on Otanes' portrait of kings and tyrants, and refocuses on the regime which, in the dialogue, becomes the center of attention: democracy, or, more precisely, the rule of the many. The three speakers give praise and blame to three political forms, it is true, but the most controversial argument is whether a *multitude* could ever take charge. Let us just imagine. A democratic Empire would have been fantastically novel because power held in the plural — and in the measureless plural of the peoples under Persian administration — was not merely different from monarchy. It was *diametrically* different from the authority of one man. Much more so than an aristocracy.

A few noblemen are replicas, more or less interchangeable, of a king who, in turn, is ultimately one of them. But *to polu* versus a *mounarchos*: this is the real dilemma. Otanes sets the stage for an opposition which is, ultimately, binary. He describes the rule of the *many* as the other extreme of the rule of *one*. For him, this complete reversal is a matter of praise. Reciprocally, Megabyzos sees the *plêthos* as the obverse of a monarch, so much so that he casts the majority as a new tyrant, one that would become much worse than any individual despot, reaching, therefore, the most distant opposite from a good government. Darius, in turn, places the *dêmos* at the lowest possible level, because whereas an elite always splits, he argues, thanks to the competition of the better men for *aretê*, the multitude band together and gang up. Again, in Darius' political arithmetic, the many coalesce for the worse, creating the highest concentration of *kakotês*, thus becoming the nastiest of all regimes versus the best of the best. To condemn a plural rule not merely as a bad one, but as the absolute worst, therefore,

is a matter of agreement between Megabyzos and Darius (although with different arguments), not to mention the silent grandees. From Otanes to Darius, the comparison follows a logic, which is increasingly dichotomic: it starts from a praise of democracy, only to end with its repeated blame as the sum total of the individual badness of the unqualified many.

For the Persians, democracy is the worst political order, but also the most counterintuitive, and the most alien to the speakers themselves.

Its challenge is, firstly, the challenge of the plural. This is a discussion about numbers — one man, a few, a lot — but has a qualitative significance and produces a powerfully normative claim about political fitness. A *plêthos* includes an indefinite amount of people, but it is not just more crowded than an elite: the many are a mass of *ordinary* people, endowed with neither wealth nor education. Can these numerous and valueless individuals be trustworthy? Can these people without qualifications be qualified, for government? What the prospect of *isonomia* challenges is the very concept of quality — the goodness of the rulers, which is required for the common good.

Secondly, the argument runs from the panegyric of the masses, altruistically uttered by a member of the royal family, to the self-serving self-portrait of a governor's son, while running for king. Democracy is unfamiliar and counterproductive for those *aristoi* who lust after power, especially its monopoly<sup>15</sup>. Megabyzos, supporter of a rule by a small *homilie*, the club of which he is also a member, agrees with Otanes about the flaws of a king, but he loathes the masses. So does Darius, who argues for one ruler — himself. Otanes, the self-less champion of the many, stands alone. He is not one of them. And he will subtract himself from the group of the candidates to kingship. He refuses to be one of those either.

Finally, to make democracy even more incongruous with the standpoint of a Persian nobleman, Otanes deviates from the rhetoric about best or better *rulers*, as the others do, and speaks instead of good *rules*. As he explains, it is the office that modifies the person who occupies it, not the other way around<sup>16</sup>. Even the most excellent man, once in charge, will be set up to stray from what is right. Reciprocally, once power is restrained through elections, rotation and accountability, then even average, common individuals will do well. A democratic Empire, in sum, would have displaced trust not only from the rule of one to that of the many, but also from the quality of admirable persons to that of reliable institutions.

15. Herodotus, 3, 72: Darius begins his leadership with a remorseless claim of self-interest. To lie or to tell the truth are two options in order to achieve one goal: one's own advantage.

16. Diego LANZA, *Il tiranno e il suo pubblico*, Torino, 1977.

A democratic Persia, we could finally add, would have been highly eccentric because democracy was considered a Greek innovation — the Athenians certainly thought so. We might guess that they were among those Hellenes who found the Persian conversation so hard to believe and who, more precisely, could not accept the plausibility of one particular claim: Otanes' invention of democracy<sup>17</sup>.

*Missing the point of democracy*

What must have been obvious to the Athenian audience in the years after the Persian wars, was the end of the story. After Otanes' failure to persuade his fellow-noblemen, the Persians were always under the rule of a Great King. *They* had become a democracy. The Persians had lost the war. *They* had won. Salamis marks the turning point of the war because it prompted Xerxes' decision to sail back to Susa, but also because it was a success for democracy. Naval strategies were perceived as relying on the most ordinary people. Sailors were poor, they belonged to the *dêmos*. To trust the fleet meant to trust the less fortunate among the citizens, even those who lacked technical experience of navigation<sup>18</sup>. Salamis was to represent not merely the carnage that had saved the Greeks from enslavement to the barbarians: it showed the excellence of the *dêmos*. In Athens, that victory became uniquely symbolic of democratic patriotism<sup>19</sup>. In the *Histories*, it demonstrates the inveterate mistake of the Persian kings about their minute neighbors, afflicted by an exotic political form — the power of the people. I will come back in a moment to the political aspects of naval warfare, but let me follow first the authorial narrator, while he builds up the causes that led to the defeat of the Persian superpower.

The Persian debate is the first scene that exposes the flaws of their intelligence. Not only because Otanes' small audience despises *isonomia*, but also because the other speakers utter what must have sounded, in the aftermath of the war, as ominous nonsense. Megabyzos could be so silly as to wish popular rule to the enemies of the Empire: « Let *them* enjoy the people, those who plan evil against Persia! » (δήμῳ μὲν νῦν, οἱ Πέρσῃσι κακὸν νοέουσι, οὗτοι χράσθων) »<sup>20</sup>. Darius could boast that, since one man had set the Persians free, that was the only way to go. For both

17. Herodotus, 3, 80 and 6, 43.

18. See *The Old Oligarch* 1, 2.

19. Peter EUBEN, « The Battle of Salamis and the Origin of Political Theory », *Corrupting Youth*, Princeton, 1997, p. 64-90.

20. Herodotus, 3, 81, 3.

grantees, the people would not deliver victory. But Herodotus himself, in his own voice, will soon claim exactly the opposite: the best recipe for power, political as well as military, is democracy. In the sub-plot of the development of Athens, from Peisistratus' tyranny to the feats of Salamis and Plataea, Herodotus claims that democracy, more precisely *isêgoriê*, equal right to speak<sup>21</sup>, brought this particular *polis* to her prosperity, and, as a consequence, to leadership, among the Greeks. Athens grew more and more powerful, thanks to Cleisthenes and his reforms (508), supported by the *demos*.

It is clear, says Herodotus, that democracy (*isêgoriê*) is an excellent thing not just in one aspect but in every way (*pantachêi*). For the Athenians, when ruled by tyrants (*turanneuomenoi*), were not better than any of their neighbors in war, but when they had gotten rid of the tyrants (*apallachthentes de turannôn*), they became first by far (*prôtoi*). This shows, therefore, that when they were held down (*katechomenoi*), they were cowardly, on the grounds that they were working for a master (*ôs despotêi ergazomenoi*), but when they had been liberated (*eleutherôthentôn*) each man was eager to work for himself (*hekastos heûtôi proethumeeto katergazesthai*).<sup>22</sup>

*Isêgoriê* adds to the basic concept of equality a connotation of activity. Athens is a city where people govern themselves, through deliberative speech-acts to which all have equal right. This connects to valor. *Isêgoriê* is « a worthy thing », *chrêma spoudaion*, because it includes not only fairness, but also the noblest value of all: heroism. Whereas the slave is the paradigm of the bad soldier, the one who fights for a master thus unwillingly (hence the whipping to the battlefield), a first-class warrior, Herodotus argues, has to be a citizen. He has to be a man who has a lot at stake, personally, individually, *hekastos*, on the battle field. Individual motivation translates into eagerness and commitment, *prothumeisthai*.

Servitude is the model of the bond between ruler and subject, in the Persian Empire. Citizenship, as membership in a *polis*, where positive and negative forms of freedom are shared and treasured by all, is distinctive of that novel form of government invented in Persia, but embraced in the

21. On the vocabulary of *dêmokratia*, *isonomia*, *isêgoriê*, see Yoshio NAKATEGAWA, « Isegoria in Herodotus », *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 37, 1988, p. 257-275; Christopher PELLING, « Speech and Action: Herodotus' Debate on the Constitutions », *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* 48, 2002, p. 123-158.

22. Herodotus, 5, 78. Translation by Sara FORSDYKE, « Athenian Democratic Ideology and Herodotus' Histories », *American Journal of Philology* 122, 2001, p. 329-358. Forsdyke argues for Herodotus' use of the language of Athenian democratic theory (especially the verb *katechein*, as in this passage), in his account of Athenian history as well as in « some of his non-Athenian narratives » such as the conversation between Xerxes and Demaratus.

Hellenic world: democracy. These are not simply cultural traits allotted to the Persians and the Greeks, in order to depict their respective characters: in the *Histories*, subjection and citizenship explain how the two powers relate to the rest of the world, and above all how they wage war and justify it. To export as far as possible the political relationship that distinguishes each of them seems to be equally irresistible. On the one hand, the Persians rely on the centralized government of the Empire, *and* cannot stop expanding. This is why they intend to conquer Greece, transforming its citizens into subjects. On the other hand, the Athenians desire to defend as many cities as possible against the threat to their liberty, while acquiring headship and hegemony in the process. The polarity of slavery and freedom operates in the construction of the plot, in a way that is hardly idealistic, ideological or ethically compelling: for Herodotus, liberty matters as a source of power. Two models of government face each other: one is obvious and ancient; the other one is new and counterintuitive. Facts will give reason to the latter: collective might relies on individual self-interest. This paradox is the realistic lesson of the Persian wars.

Two other conversations, staged during the preparations of the campaign, amplify the contrast that the debate on the constitutions has outlined so strikingly.

Xerxes' ambition is obvious and massive: it includes not merely punishing the Athenians for burning the shrines in Sardis, but taking control of Europe and unifying it, thus making everybody a slave<sup>23</sup>.

If we crush the Athenians and their neighbors who dwell in the country of Pelops the Phrygian, we shall so extend the empire of Persia that its boundaries will be God's own sky, so that the sun will not look down upon any land beyond the boundaries of what is ours. With your help I shall pass through Europe from end to end and make it all one country. For if what I am told is true, there is not a city or a nation in the world, which will be able to withstand us, once these are out of the way. Thus the guilty and the innocent alike shall bear the yoke of servitude.

In a council at court, the king discusses his project and asks for advice. A young cousin of his and his closest counselor, Mardonios, speaks first, in favor of the war. The Greeks are small and poor, he claims. They have absurd notions of warfare, because they fight all the time and in open fields. It is not in their character to take risks against the best army in the world. Like the noble Persians who could not imagine the advantage of democracy, Mardonios underestimates the Greeks. For him they are simply few and excessively prompt to fight each other. In his youthful enthusiasm,

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23. Herodotus, 7, 8.

what he fails to see is that they fight each other because they are brave. They do it in an open field because they use the hoplitic phalanx. The Greek audience knows that they certainly will take the risk. Listening to the hasty, unwarranted claims of the young hawk, an older advisor, Xerxes' uncle, Artabanus, is greatly alarmed. Beware of the Greeks, he warns, they are great fighters! Careful about the dangers of being big! An experienced man, he measures the risks of a campaign, which would take the army and the navy into distant and hostile territories, and cautions Xerxes against his self-assurance as well as his mistaken view of the enemy. His is a dissenting voice that could, again, help the King take a different direction, and avoid disaster. Xerxes hesitates, changes his mind, but inspired by a dream, finally goes ahead: he wants the conquest of the whole world and its total subjection to Persia. The campaign begins<sup>24</sup>. The infantry and the fleet cross the Hellespont, and progress from the North, toward Athens.

A third significant discussion, just before the naval battle at the Artemisium, offers one more comparative meditation<sup>25</sup>. Facing an unfamiliar landscape, made of so many small *poleis*, Xerxes wonders, with a Spartan former king in exile, who happens to be his guest, how those few soldiers, could stand up to an army as big as his, « especially if they were not under a single master, but all perfectly free to do as they pleased ». Demaratus, replies:

...the Spartans; fighting singly, they are as good as any, but fighting together they are the best soldiers in the world. They are free — yes — but not entirely free; for they have a master, and that master is the Law, *nomos*, which they fear much more than your subjects fear you. Whatever this master commands, they do, and his command never varies: it is never to retreat in battle, however great the odds, but always to remain in formation, and to conquer or die.

In response to this manifesto of a novel conception of excellence — personal and yet shared — and of the disembodied leadership of the Law, Xerxes bursts out laughing<sup>26</sup>. Herodotus has him react as an internal audience, one that does not seem to grasp, or even contemplate, that the authority of *Nomos* can be a serious matter, and that military discipline depends on individual commitment to that authority. Beyond

24. Herodotus, 7, 19. On the debate, as a travesty and as an ineffective lesson, see Christopher PELLING, « East Is East and West Is West — or Are They? National Stereotypes in Herodotus », *Histos* 1, 1997, p. 51-66; Jonas GRETHLEIN, « How Not To Do History: Xerxes in Herodotus' Histories », *American Journal of Philology* 130, 2009, p. 195-218.

25. Herodotus, 7, 103-104.

26. On laughter, see Donald LATEINER, « No Laughing Matter: A Literary Tactic in Herodotus », *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 107, 1977, p. 173-182.

the aggrandizing words of Demaratus, he still sees the undersized<sup>27</sup>, phantomatically ruled, belligerent Greeks, as comic characters.

Herodotus stages here another theatrical moment, which fits aptly a Greek theory of comedy. Plato's *Philebus* defines laughter as the invidious, mixed pleasure that we feel in front of people who claim or pretend to possess great qualities of the soul and the body, and abundant external goods. They believe to be richer, more beautiful, or more virtuous and knowledgeable than they actually are. We laugh at the discrepancy between the self-delusion or illusion to deceive, of those naïve individuals who do not know themselves, and *our* superior knowledge of them, because we can see through their vanity<sup>28</sup>. Now, Xerxes' hilarity betrays exactly that kind of belief: the airs of those pathetic Greeks, *milites gloriosi*, will not trick him.

From the point of view of the Greek audience of the *Histories*, however, the king is himself ridiculous. To fight at the orders of a concept, a principle — the Law — collectively, and not under a real master, out of tangible fear? Nonsense. Without the slightest irony, Xerxes thinks that he knows better. But what the Greeks see is that, in his self-importance, which is culturally encoded — isn't he the best sovereign, in the best political form, among the best people in the world?<sup>29</sup> — the Persian ruler cannot even begin to understand the connection between *isonomia* (Athens) or *nomos* (Sparta), and power. Like his predecessors, when they were deliberating and finally voting in favor of his father's opinion, Xerxes appears to conceive of leadership as a personal, embodied, physical domination of a submissive people, who bend in front of their king<sup>30</sup>, or of reluctant soldiers, to be whipped to the battlefield. Bodies kept in check by a body. The Persians, Herodotus claims, are trained to tell the truth, always. Their literally-mindedness is perhaps linked to their habit to take politics at face-value, at the surface of its corporeal visibility.

Herodotus has Xerxes laugh, therefore, but too soon. Alas, success can be assessed only retrospectively, at the end of one's life. We know this uncomfortable truth already, since it is at the very beginning of Book 1 that Solon has instructed the unwise Croesus: « Look to the end! »<sup>31</sup>.

27. On the attention of the Persians to quantity, scale and numbers, see David KONSTAN, « Persians, Greeks and Empire », *Arethusa* 20, 1987, p. 59-73.

28. Plato, *Philebus* 47 d-50 b.

29. Monarchy is the finest political form, because it is the rule of the most excellent man: this is the argument of Darius in the constitutional debate. The Persians consider themselves superior to the rest of the world: Herodotus, 3, 38.

30. Herodotus, 7, 13.

31. Herodotus, 1, 32.

So we suspect that the Persian king will not have the last laugh — and we begin to smile.

### *Democratic warfare*

Persians and Greeks are politically different. In the three dialogues we have examined — on political orders, on the desirability of the war, and on leadership — this antithesis of political cultures builds up with increasing vividness. Above all, the narrative sequence reinforces our impression that the Persian elite, being unable to appreciate the aggressiveness generated by self-interest in the Hellenic *poleis*, cannot evaluate the threat they pose. This cultural insensitivity turns into poor intelligence. Misinformation dictates erroneous strategies. Ultimately, Xerxes' lack of discernment finds its most persuasive demonstration in the battle of Salamis, in September 480 BCE. Herodotus does his best to make of this military event a politically significant affair. Here, at last, all the theoretical mistakes of the Persians come to maturation, and their prejudices about the Greeks will prove ruinous.

In his exchange with Demaratus, an incredulous Xerxes had dismissed the ability of the Greeks (Spartans in that case) to preserve their *taxis*, and fight to death. But in the straits of Salamis, that ability turned out to be invaluable. The formation firmly maintained by the Athenians and their allies at sea prevailed on the chaos, which arose among the Persians. The legendary smallness of the Hellenic forces was one of the strongest reasons for self-confidence in Susa. But the manageable size of the Greek fleet could be used as a tactical advantage, in order to defeat the innumerable and cumbersome Persian vessels, trapped in a narrow space<sup>32</sup>. It was a clever plan. Themistocles, Herodotus tells us, is the man who best understood the resources and the chances of the Athenians. For years, he had strategically prepared the expansion of the fleet. In the public debate about how to use the great quantity of silver, suddenly extracted from the mine of Laurion in 482 BCE, he had recommended that it be used to finance the construction of triremes. That navy was now ready. At the beginning of the war, he had interpreted a Delphic oracle, alluding to a « wooden wall », as the only defense available to the Athenians. That metaphor, he thought, could only mean « the boats »<sup>33</sup>. Even after the devastation of Attica, as long as there were men on the ships, for him, there was still a city.

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32. Herodotus, 8, 60.

33. Herodotus, 7, 141-144.



At the Artemision, the Persians had already realized that the size of their fleet caused their first, unexpected, undoing. The ships, fouling one another, made a disastrous confusion<sup>34</sup>. At Salamis, the same thing occurred, and much more dramatically :

Since the Greek fleet worked together as a whole, while the Persians had lost formation and were no longer fighting on any plan (σὺν κόσμῳ ναυμαχούντων καὶ κατὰ τάξιν, τῶν δὲ βαρβάρων οὐτε τεταγμένων ἔτι οὔτε σὺν νόφ ποιόντων οὐδέν), that was what was bound to happen.... Every man of them did his best for fear of Xerxes, feeling that the king's eye was on him<sup>35</sup>.

Demaratus had predicted that *taxis* was the Spartans' forte. Xerxes had broken into laughter. Now it was time for him to experience the serious benefits of good order. The Athenians and the Aeginetans at sea shared the same military technique. *Taxis* depends upon political values, namely courage, solidarity and discipline. It also requires political emotions: the right fear, for the right master. At Salamis, the Persians were frightened by their king, but lost formation; the Greeks obeyed the Law and held on, together. Even in its tactics and strategies, Herodotus is saying with the structure of his tale, the war is a conflict of political theories.

The description of the battle harks back to the dialogue between Xerxes and Demaratus, but also to the history of Athens. By favorising individual motivation, Herodotus had claimed in Book 5, the process of democratization spurred growth and military success. In the waters of Salamis, the Persian soldiers were much better than they had been at Euboea, for they all were eager to do their best, out of fear of Xerxes — each one thinking that the king was watching him (καίτοι ἦσάν γε καὶ ἐγένοντο ταύτην τὴν ἡμέρην μακρῶ ἀμείνονες αὐτοὶ ἐωυτῶν ἢ πρὸς Εὐβοίῃ, πᾶς τις προθυμέμενος καὶ δειμαίνων Ξέρξην, ἐδόκεέ τε ἕκαστος ἐωυτὸν θεήσασθαι βασιλέα). Every single man, *hekastos*, was *prothumeomenos* — exactly as an Athenian hoplite would be. Herodotus makes a point of acknowledging the *prothumeisthai* of the Persian soldiers at Salamis. It is a different kind of eagerness, however: they were eager to fight, out of fear for the king. It is a different kind of individual motivation: each one knew that the king was observing him. It is not the sheer selfishness of the free citizen, who fights just *for himself*, αὐτὸς ἕκαστος ἐωυτῶ προεθυμέετο κατεργάζεσθαι<sup>36</sup>.

34. Herodotus, 8, 16.

35. Herodotus, 8, 86.

36. Herodotus, 5, 78. Cf. 9, 62-63, on the behavior of the Persians at Plataea.

*Otanes' blind spot*

For Herodotus, the failure of the Empire is the failure of the political thought of their elite: they miscalculate the military potential of a self-governing multitude, thus they trust their traditional monarchy. To miss the opportunity of democracy, in the constitutional debate, was a first, theoretical error. In retrospect, Herodotus makes that oversight seem not inevitable, but coherent with the Persians' representation of themselves.

Firstly, as a society, the Persians are undermined by an extreme ethnocentrism. This is a universal feature, Herodotus claims<sup>37</sup>. In Persia however it goes as far as it can possibly go.

Themselves they consider in every way superior to everyone else in the world, and allow other nations a share of good qualities decreasing according to distance, the furthest off being in their view the worst<sup>38</sup>.

Whereas they prove remarkably receptive to foreign customs in matters of fashion or sexuality<sup>39</sup>, when it comes to politics, their high esteem of themselves reduces their propensity to innovation. « Let us continue with our own tradition »: this was Darius' winning argument. The past is ground for the reinforcement of a proud identity. To take the chance of democracy would have meant to venture into uncharted territory. Metaphorically and geographically, the Persians disregard distances. I will come back in a moment to this highly significant detail of their cultural portrait.

Secondly, Darius fails to understand the meaning of freedom: his idea of liberty is the independence of Persia from the Medes, secured by Cyrus in 548 BCE, not individual freedom for the citizens of Persia or the whole Empire. Megabyzos, as we have seen, wishes democracy to his enemies, obviously implying that it would make them easy to beat.

Finally, and most importantly, even Otanes fails to make a case for his democratic principles, as a Greek would typically do<sup>40</sup>. Otanes associates

37. Universal ethnocentrism: Herodotus, 3, 38.

38. Herodotus, 1, 134.

39. Herodotus, 1,135.

40. Allusions to the limitations of Otanes' description of democracy can be found in Susan Sara MONOSON, *Plato's Democratic Entanglements: Athenian Politics and the Practice of Philosophy*, Princeton, 2000, p. 33-35; Christopher PELLING, « Speech and Action: Herodotus' Debate on the Constitutions », *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* 48, 2002, p. 123-158. Pelling touches upon Otanes' silence about democratic, self-interested courage: « Why does not Otanes say anything of democracy when everyone is striving for themselves rather than for a master? » (p. 138-139). Otanes' scanty account of democracy (focused on one of its connotations, *isonomia*), he argues, conveys Herodotus'

*isonomia* with the « many ». But we have seen that Herodotus, speaking in his own voice, associates Athenian democracy not only with *isêgoriê*, but also with *eleutheria* and the fact that, after the fall of the tyrants, *each man* now feels that he is fighting *for himself*, and, for that very reason, becomes the best possible warrior<sup>41</sup>. The narrator readily admits his awareness that democracy means increased capabilities and a redistribution of power. That is the beauty of equality.

This train of thoughts that associates equality, liberty and supremacy is crucial for our understanding of the *Histories*.

In the context of a political culture not yet committed to universal human rights, freedom means the opposite of slavery, but without the abolition of slavery. Liberty is a privilege, and it implies a position of power: to be one who owns slaves, instead of being one of them. Freedom for all the citizens of a *polis* means shared mastership, collective pride and generalized self-interest. The « many » are many masters, each keen on his own franchise -- instead of so many slaves, to be whipped to the battlefield! Ancient democracy shapes a novel image of *hoi polloi*: they are not any longer the uneducated, incompetent, irrational and wicked mob, for whom excellence remains inaccessible. To be trusted as a self-governing group and a reliable army, the majority has to be held reasonable and, above all, courageous. A gentrification of the crowd, so to speak, has to occur in the political discourse, in response to all the blame that, from an oligarchic standpoint, used to befall the multitude. This reassessment of the qualities to be found in the many actually takes place in the fifth century, in the theater and more importantly in political oratory. It culminates with the language of autochthony, nobility and patriotism, in the most ideological genre of public rhetoric, the funeral orations. Prowess on the battlefield is the virtue that best connects the hoplites, and even the sailors, to the warriors from the aristocratic past. The excellence of the intrepid Homeric hero is reenacted by the citizens/soldiers, in the plural. Herodotus' recollection of the history of Athens establishes precisely this basic principle: equally shared freedom brings power to a people of citizens soldiers.

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intent to make of popular rule just a « polarizing foil » for tyranny (in this context). I agree that Otanes is interested in the binary opposition of the two regimes, but I maintain that, in the perspective of the war, the military consequences of democracy (and the inability to recognize them) are uniquely significant. The Persian elite are so utterly impervious to the reality of democratic warfare, that they all share the same misinformation about the enemy. Not even Otanes can see the heroic point of democracy. There is only one exception: Artabanus.

41. Herodotus, 5, 78.

Otanes, however, does not seem to make sense of *individual* motivation for heroism. *Prothumeisthai* is not part of his vocabulary. He does not argue that the *plêthos*, the majority, in a democracy, is the sum totals of the *hekastoi*, the « each ones » committed to distinction, thus destined to become, for the first time, a collective agent of *aretê*. For him, we said, the mass remains the opposite of the tyrant: as faceless and self-controlled as he is hyper-individualized and unrestrained. Otanes holds a popular, not a heroic, view of the power of the people. On this point, he shares the language of the other Persian speakers: the many are just a group. And yet, in an aristocratic environment, the most felicitous utterance would be to pinpoint the effects of a political order on valor, the obvious aristocratic value.

Why, we might ask, did he fail to use that rhetoric? The coherence of the text, read retrospectively, requires from Otanes a difficult role to play: he has to be the enlightened utopian who dares trust *isonomia* for the very first time. But he has to fall short of grasping its *entire* beauty, including its paradoxically aristocratic connotation: the enthusiasm to fight for liberty. The reader is compelled to conclude that the son of Pharnaspes must be too much part of the elite to praise not only the justice, but also the potential *nobility* of the individuals who compose *to polu*. It is difficult to rethink, all by himself and all at once, the submissive subjects of the Great King, as highly individualized citizens. He can only conceive of the collective wisdom of the crowd, as a consequence of procedures and regulations. This is why — we are to understand — Otanes fails to argue that an Empire administered by a democratic government would become, first of all, more powerful because better defended by more valiant fighters. In the selection of his arguments in praise of democracy, Otanes, too, misses what would be the most relevant, and potentially persuasive, point. And his opinion is unanimously dismissed.

Now, like all arguments *ex silentio*, Otanes' neglect of the military consequences of democratization could be considered inconclusive, and discarded. But, let us not forget, the debate takes place in a very particular context, one where a few conspirators, after a coup, are to decide the future destiny of an ever-expanding Empire. They are not just admiring or criticizing different constitutions, at leisure. There is urgency, and a sense of power politics: which *politeia* will make us most potent? Darius will win precisely with the reminder of a successfully imperialistic past. Otanes' silence on freedom and its realistic advantage resounds most eloquently.

*Democracy: Persian and Greek*

Within the *Histories*, the Persian dialogue stands out in its singularity. But we can appreciate even better the constraints of this unconventional dramatic setting, if we compare the scene with two other famous exchanges, on the respective merits of different forms of government.

In 472 BCE, eight years after Salamis, the Athenians had seen Aeschylus' *Persians*. In one of the most memorable scenes, Queen Atossa, Xerxes' mother, recounts a disquieting, incomprehensible dream. She has seen two women, representing Persia and Athens. Persia bends obediently, under the weight of a yoke. Athens, in contrast, raises her head, takes that same yoke in her hands, and breaks it down. Atossa is at a loss: she knows nothing about these distant enemies of her son, who seem to be winning the war. She now inquires about Athens, and her questions are framed within her conventional vision of politics. These Greeks are apparently fewer; they cannot be called the slaves, or even the subjects, to a human being<sup>42</sup>: how could they dare win? The chorus replies in Greek terms, insisting on the underestimated menace from those free, fierce although diminutive people. Pride and propensity to freedom is what makes them threatening. On his return to the royal palace, Xerxes will have learned his lesson. « The people from Ionia do not flee from the spear », claims the Chorus. And Xerxes: « They are manly! I have seen a disaster I never expected »<sup>43</sup>.

In a later play, contemporary to Herodotus, the *Suppliants* (420 BCE), Euripides revisits the attack of Polyneices and his Argive allies, against Thebes, where Eteocles, Polyneices' disloyal brother, holds the throne. The two siblings are now dead; the corpses of the Argive warriors lie on the battle field, unburied. Their mothers form the chorus of the suppliant women; they are now trying to recover the bodies of their sons, and give them a proper burial. They address their supplication to Athens, where the dramatic action is set. A Herald from Thebes arrives, in order to threaten the city lest she help the women from Argos to recover their dead. His first question is, again, unsurprising: « Who is the tyrant in this city »? He will then engage in a sort of abridged constitutional debate, with the King of Athens, Theseus. His elitist argument against democracy is that politics and making a living are incompatible activities. Politics ought to be for leisurely people, because the ordinary citizen lacks a good education,

42. Aeschylus, *The Persians* 242.

43. *Ibidem*, 1025-1026.

acquired in time. Speaking is for him an empty activity. In a democracy ignorance reigns: a poor man is too busy to give clever, competent advice, only his tongue, in haste, gives him access to the political arena. The crude irrationality of the many results in a complete lack of individual accountability, for the faceless crowd as well as for the popular leaders. Democracy is nothing but the rule of the mob, the herald claims, plagued by too much rhetoric for private gain, and no individual responsibility. The people who vote in the assembly never give account for their mistakes. The orators and political actors, on the contrary, do not care for the public good, only for their self-interest.

To this tirade, Theseus replies that Athens is a free city. The *dêmos*, not one man, hold power. First, there is justice: not too much belongs to the rich, the poor man has a fair share, *ison*. Whereas the tyrant owns the Law, democracy is based on written and public laws, and equal justice for the poor and the rich. Freedom is firstly the right to speak in the Assembly. Who has a good proposal he wishes to introduce for public discussion? This is fair, *ison*. The contrast culminates with the destructiveness of tyranny, versus the positive sociability of a democracy. Whereas, for a tyrant, brilliant young men represent a constant menace to be eliminated, here they flourish. Whereas a tyrant threatens young women sexually, democracy respects the honor of their fathers.

How then could a city remain stable, where one cuts short all enterprise and mows down the young like meadow-flowers in spring-time? What good is it to acquire wealth and livelihood for children, merely to add to the tyrant's substance by one's toil? Why train up daughters virtuously in our homes to gratify a tyrant's whim, whenever he wishes, and cause tears to those who rear them? <sup>44</sup>

We can see the irony of Euripide's text. The herald despises speeches and yet he is the one who initiates the contest. He is not introduced as an aristocrat, but speaks on behalf of the elite, while it is a king who voices democratic ideas. The man from Thebes misses the point of democracy, as characterized by public debate (not only anonymous vote), and the accountability of each magistrate (through public examinations). He fails to appreciate — and even denies — the promotion of individuality: for him, democracy is just the power of the nameless masses, behind which cowardly politicians can hide. Theseus, on the contrary, highlights how democracy appeals to personal responsibility. The right of each citizen to go to the assembly, allows him to stand up in order to give advice, in front of everybody else, in the open. This is a performance of justice

44. Euripides, *Suppliants* 447-454.

and courage. Democracy, the king adds, favors the flourishing of brilliant, well-bred young men, its potential warriors. The citizen of a democratic city — democrats argue on stage, when they speak in a Greek fashion —, is a fearless, valiant man in war (the *Persians*) as well as in peace (the *Suppliants*). The challenges of democracy call for a certain intrepidity, be it patriotism or competitive publicity.

We have seen that Otanes, in contrast, uses all his authority and fervor in detailing the self-restraint of the many — *to plêthos* and *to polu* — their accountability, their use of selection by lot, and their brief tenure in office, but fails to mention what would be the most pertinent and persuasive corroboration of his view: that those many men, taken one by one, are the bravest as well as the most collaborative fighters — and that the Empire would thrive. His omission is deafening. It tells us that, unfortunately, his vision of democracy must include a blind spot. For all his incredible political creativity, Otanes is not yet an Athenian king. In 522 BCE, the Persian grandee had not foreseen the military power of the people: he was not a realist.

This is coherent not only with the polarity we have reconstructed so far, but also with a comparably unexpected scenario. Herodotus shows another Persian nobleman busy to spread democracy, this time in practice, and among the Greeks. In 491 BCE, the same young, arrogant, over-enthusiastic general, cousin of Xerxes, who later would speak so forcefully in favor of the war, set out to invade Greece and conquer Athens. On his way, he encouraged the establishment of popular rule in the Greek colonies of the Ionian coast. This act, Herodotus comments, was as hard to believe, for certain Greeks, as Otanes' proposal<sup>45</sup>. This comment invites the reader not to forget about the constitutional debate. It also instructs her on how to interpret its cross-cultural implications: whenever a Persian seems to sponsor democracy, Greek audiences tend to be suspicious of the narrator, but they are wrong. We might be tempted to take the whole episode as a proof that, for Herodotus, « democracy was not foreign to Persia, because Mardonius had established democratic governments in Ionia »<sup>46</sup>. But precisely because, from beginning to end, Mardonius is such a strenuous champion of the conquest of Greece, we ought to question how this initiative could possibly be part of such a project. Why would he work so hard to see democracy implemented, in *Greek* cities? Most improbably

45. Herodotus, 6, 43.

46. James Allan EVANS, « Notes on the Debate of the Persian Grandees in Herodotus 3.80-82 », *Quaderni Urbinati di Cultura Classica* 36, 1981, p. 79-84, quotation, p. 80.

out of ideological fondness for the commons; much more likely because, for him, democracy would make those *poleis* inoffensive, and even more vulnerable to Persian control. This is the only explanation that fits his intrusion in the politics of the Hellenic cities, as it must be the meaning of Megabyzos' cavalier, and incautious, wish that Persia's enemies should enjoy democracy.

It takes a Greek, Aristagoras — the ruler of Miletus and the man who initiates the Ionian revolt, the final trigger of the war — to realize that the only regime apt to guarantee a reliable submission to the Empire, in those same cities, is tyranny. Democracy, he knows, would encourage their rebellion. It is with the intention of harming Darius as best he can that, firstly, he renounces his own tyranny in Miletus, in order to secure the precious support of his subjects, and then promotes democratic revolutions in other Ionian cities<sup>47</sup>. Like Cleisthenes in his conflict with Isagoras, Aristagoras takes the *dêmos* on board, knowing that such an alliance will reinforce his position. These men fully understand that enfranchised citizens are the best asset for a belligerent state.

The Spartans reason with the same — unsurprisingly Greek — logic. After helping the Athenian people to expel the Peisistratidae, they understand what a terrible mistake they have committed, as they begin to apprehend the growth of the, now self-governing, city. Aware of its increasing strength, they try to convince all their allies to intervene in Athens, but this time in order to destabilize democracy and re-install Hippias in power<sup>48</sup>. They realized, Herodotus argues,

that a free Attica would be a match for them, and that the only way of weakening their rivals and reducing them to obedience was to establish a tyranny in Athens<sup>49</sup>.

The pan-Hellenic crowd convened in Sparta will refuse to support such an aggressive operation of government building. We will come back to this pivotal scene in a moment.

All the different sub-plots we have examined until now converge on a consistent, narrative theory of politics. Like Xerxes, when he bursts out laughing in front of Demaratus' praise for the military capacity of the Greeks, Otanes or Mardonius cannot imagine that freedom for all

47. Herodotus, 5, 37-38.

48. Herodotus, 5, 91.

49. Herodotus, 5, 91. The Spartans expected gratitude from the Athenian people, but « we put power into the hands of an ungrateful rabble », they lament, « which had no sooner raised its head by our generous act of liberation that it turned against us and flung us out, ourselves and our king », *ibidem*.



translates into force; that citizens are, above all, better soldiers. Therefore Otanes fails to persuade his fellow noblemen, and Mardonius commits a strategic mistake. Herodotus is aware that to cast a Persian as a theorist or an activist of democracy sounds unusual, and he emphasizes his boldness in so doing. He makes abundantly clear, however, that when a Persian handles *dēmokratia* in words or in deeds, he is bound to underestimate its greatest potential.

You understand well enough what slavery is, but freedom you have never experienced, so you do not know if it tastes sweet or bitter », two Spartan ambassadors tell a Persian general. From a Greek point of view, a Persian simply cannot admit liberty as a condition of individual empowerment (rather than selfish license); of personal commitment to the success of the People (rather than confusion with a massive plurality): a condition so dear to each (adult, free and male) member of that society that he would « fight for it not with spears only, but with axes too<sup>50</sup>.

### *Playing tricks*

If we now align the respective features of the Persians and the Greeks, we can recognize two very distinctive political cultures: on the one hand the despotic, literally-minded, conservative Asians; on the other hand the innovative, politically-minded, democratic Greeks. It is tempting indeed to take at face value the big picture of the war, and we could be content with this schematic reading. But this is not all Herodotus has to say. So far we have followed the more visible lines of the *Histories*. It is now time to look more closely at a particular feature of this long, intricate narrative: the fact that the narrator is a traveler. There we may discover not merely details, nuances and subtleties in the treatment of different peoples<sup>51</sup>, but a systematic political theory: one that entails a compelling idea of time, change, and knowledge.

In her study of the Herodotean characterization of the two cultures, Norma Thompson highlights a remarkable parallel<sup>52</sup>. The Persians define their political identity in the constitutional debate. The Greeks show who

50. Herodotus, 7, 135.

51. François HARTOG, *Le miroir d'Hérodote. Essai sur la représentation de l'autre*, Paris, 1980, Engl. tr. *The Mirror of Herodotus. The Representation of the Other in the Writing of History*, Berkley, 1988, on the representation of the Scythians, an inverted version of the Greeks themselves.

52. Norma THOMPSON, *Herodotus and the Origins of the Political Community: Arion's Leap*, Yale, 1996, p. 88-89.

they are in an analogous moment, one that we have just evoked, when the Spartans try to persuade their allies to support the reintroduction of tyranny in Athens, but to no avail because the representatives of the other cities, in the name of the gods of Greece, indignantly refuse to do so. They could not possibly inflict such a hardship on a Greek *polis*<sup>53</sup>.

By placing the greatest emphasis on this correspondence Thomson does justice indeed to the Persian discussion. The exceptionally enlightened decision made in the pan-Hellenic assembly, however, does not capture entirely the alleged character of « the Greeks ». Innumerable *poleis* compose a cultural world that is multifaceted, fragmented, mobile and in constant osmosis and transformation within the Mediterranean space. The neutralization of power which, in certain cities, will start the historical process of democratization is uniquely Hellenic<sup>54</sup>. But the process is not without its accidents, interruptions, trials and errors. The Athenians undergo an exemplary progress, for Herodotus, in which the growing stability of democracy comes with increasing prosperity and power. But such a successful ascent is unique and even that evolution is hardly faultless, and stumbles, on the contrary, on incredibly foolish judgments and popular stupidity.

Among the Greeks too, the historian shows, there are people who deliberately choose not to embrace democracy and justice. Such is the case of the Samians. After the death of the tyrant Polycrates, the man in charge of the affairs of the city, Maeandrios offers to the people the opportunity to shift from monarchy to a just constitution. He erects an altar to Zeus Liberator, and he calls a meeting of all the citizens. « You know as well as I do », he claims, « that the scepter of Polycrates, and the power it represents, have passed into my hands, so that I can, if I wish, become your absolute master »<sup>55</sup>. The potential tyrant stands in front of the citizenry, aware of his power, but only to perform an act of spontaneous renunciation to that power. He puts forward, for the people to accept, equality before the law, and freedom. The people of Samos, however, do not take that offer. A man in the assembly stands up to accuse Maeandrios of corruption: the well-intentioned ruler reckons that if he does not hold on to tyranny, someone else will do so. He changes his mind, and begins to act in the cruelest manner, and the purest tyrannical tradition.

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53. Herodotus, 5, 92.

54. Jean-Pierre VERNANT, « Naissance du politique », in *La Traversée des frontières*, Paris, 2004, p. 141-146.

55. Herodotus, 3, 142.

« So, it seems, the people of Samos did not want liberty »<sup>56</sup>. The subsequent events will lay bare what a mistake this was. Thanks to tyranny Samos will be an easy conquest for the Persians. « The result was that when the Persians arrived in Samos to restore the exiled Syloson, nobody lifted a finger against them »<sup>57</sup>. Significantly, the Persian contingent was under the command of Otanes<sup>58</sup>.

Among the Greeks too, Herodotus takes pleasure in insisting, there are people so silly that they could welcome a tyrant, being easily deceived by the most ludicrous masquerade. The Hellenes, Herodotus admits,

have never been simpletons. For centuries past they have been distinguished from other nations by superior wits; and of all Greeks the Athenians are allowed to be the most intelligent: yet it was at the Athenians' expense that this ridiculous trick was played<sup>59</sup>.

Peisistratus, the Athenian tyrant, wanted to recover his power in the city, after having been expelled a first time. First he organized a marriage with the daughter of Megacles, then he devised a seemingly absurd subterfuge. He dressed a beautiful, tall woman to look like the goddess Athena, put her on a chariot and drove back to Athens standing proud at her side. Messengers spread the rumor that Athena herself was bringing Peisistratus back to his own city. The Athenians, in awe, accepted him as a sovereign.

The political intelligence of the Greeks, key to their incredible military superiority over the Persian Empire, remains still fallible for Herodotus. He certainly takes an Athenian standpoint; he orchestrates the culmination of the war in a battle which resembles a duel, with Xerxes and Themistocles facing each other, in their respective styles of leadership. And yet he can also recognize their gullibility, in the past. The Athenian people believed twice the charade of Peisistratus, and twice they happily embraced tyranny, before needing the help of the Spartans — of all people — to expel their rulers and recover their freedom. For all their collective heroism, that Herodotus is happy to celebrate, their political growth is a work in progress: so much so that, ironically, the farcical epiphany of Athena is the only episode, in the *Histories*, that can be placed side by side with the contrived performance of Darius' horse.

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56. Herodotus, 3, 143. Graham SHIPLEY, *A History of Samos 800-188 BC*, Oxford, 1988, p. 103: « The remark may have a real content, implying that the Samians failed to use Maeandrios to protect themselves against Persia ».

57. Herodotus, 3, 144.

58. Christopher PELLING, « Herodotus and Samos », *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies* 54, 2011, p. 1-18.

59. Herodotus, 1, 60.

The election of Darius was a preposterous trick, the cunning deception of impossibly naïve people<sup>60</sup>. As mentioned earlier, at the end of the debate about the future of the Empire, the six noblemen in competition for the kingship decide that they will convene the day after, at dawn, at the outskirts of the city. There, will become king the one whose horse will neigh first.

Darius explains this agreement to his groom, Oebares, and asks him to devise a plan so that his mount will be the first to salute the rising sun. Oebares is a shrewd man, expert in animal behavior. He will concoct one of the following tactics (since the Persians give two versions of the story, Herodotus reports): either he immediately takes the stallion to that particular spot, lets him slowly approach and finally mount his favorite mare, so that the day after the animal will remember that pleasurable place, and recognize it vocally; or he rubs the sex of the same mare, keeps his hand hidden, and then, at the very instant when the sun passes the horizon, plants it under the nostrils of Darius' horse, who responds, again, enthusiastically and loudly. « In this way Darius, son of Hystaspes, became king of Persia »<sup>61</sup>.

The noble Persians, let us remember, have just rejected the selection of officials by lot, which Otanes had sponsored on behalf of justice and equality. However, they are now choosing their only ruler, their supreme authority both political and military, with the vote, so to speak, of a horny horse. The allegedly best man, endowed with the most excellent character and the keenest judgment, is picked by chance and by an animal, in a parody of what any Greek would consider the most outrageous and irrational form of demagogy. The fact that one of the contenders manipulates the game with a perfidious wile does not contradict that, for the other participants, Darius is chosen by the horse who happens to be the first to send a signal, at a given time. Now, this entire scene could not be more blatantly at odds with what the democratic Greeks regard as the most serious political choice: that of the highest military officers. Even in the most extreme form of popular rule, such a special appointment would never be made at random: too much competence, experience and moral fiber are required from a general<sup>62</sup>.

When the horse emits his mating cry, nobody laughs, the Persian aristocrats bow. The internal audience is under the spell. But we can see an

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60. Herodotus, 3, 85-87.

61. Herodotus, 3, 88.

62. See *The Old Oligarch* 3; Aristotle, *Constitution of the Athenians*, 43-44.

extraordinary comic effect for the readers, precisely because these great men are being so easily deluded. Again, the scene fits the definition of what is laughable: it is ridiculous to claim to know more than one actually knows. The Persians think they know who is best, but they let a stallion decide who it is. The failure of the Persians is the failure of their political theory. It is also the failure of their political practice.

And yet, Herodotus' Athenians are not supposed to look ethnically superior to the Persians, or even perfectly mature. Like the Persians they have succumbed to the charms of despotism. Nothing innate predisposes them to political wisdom; only their history over more than a hundred years will show their progress. Their advantage is that they have finally outgrown their puerile propensity to trust big men, those who ride with goddesses or whose horses neigh at the sun. This is the only difference between them and the Persians. The Persians, through the centuries covered in the *Histories*, never change. They are faithful to themselves and their political tradition, and therefore remain childish like the Athenians in the sixth century, when, without a flicker of disbelief, they applauded Peisistratus, triumphant in company of Athena. The Persians stay with monarchy because this is the more reassuring political form. The constitutional debate was an opening to a novel future. They have closed the door to that future and embraced the past, which will lead them to their downfall. The Greeks, Herodotus tells in his long ramified narration, have become what they are now: their excellence is the outcome of a slow coming of age. And yet, they grew up only locally, as the fatal errors of the Samians and the Ionians demonstrate.

But there is more. Even now, in the present of the conflict with Darius and Xerxes, the Athenians can prove a bit too liable to persuasion. Aristagoras, the same man who instigates the Ionian revolt, comes to Athens hoping to convince them to send a contingent of ships in aid of Miletus, then invade the neighboring lands, and finally march to Sardis. With no hesitation, the Athenians are prompt to take up the challenge. The king of Sparta, Cleomenes, whom Aristagoras had visited in the first place, had had the bright idea of asking at least one question: how far was Sardis from the coast? Once he had learned the actual distance, he prudently recoiled from the prospect. The three thousand men gathered in the Athenian assembly, heedless of the danger, gladly vote to make their way on foot, into such vast unfriendly territory. « Apparently it is easier to impose upon a crowd than upon an individual », comments Herodotus<sup>63</sup>.

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63. Herodotus, 5, 97.

For Herodotus, the citizens of Athens are not the champions of a purely defensive war, waged to protect the whole of Greece, against an imperialistic invasion. This is the self-satisfied image they will project later, in their public rhetoric. For the historian, it is they who initiate the war, convinced that they could easily conquer Asia.

Like the Persians, the Athenians would expand as aggressively as possible, if they could. Like the Persians, they entertain the comforting prejudice that their enemies have absurd notions of warfare: don't they go to battle wearing trousers, sporting a turban on their heads, but no shield? Their self-confidence and poor intelligence about the enemy makes the Athenians comparable, in this critical moment, to Xerxes and his incautious advisors. With the difference that they appear much more frivolous. What will undo the imperial army, Herodotus will show, is not an exotic uniform, but its undemocratic disorganization and its defective training, joined to the mistakes of its commander<sup>64</sup>. But the three thousand Athenians who enthusiastically vote for the war in Lydia do not make their decision on this basis. The ships are dispatched to Miletus, and « those ships, concludes Herodotus, were the beginning of all the evils that befell the barbarians and the Greeks »<sup>65</sup>.

Democracy, Herodotus is telling his audience, does not preclude those expansionist ambitions that would mirror, reciprocate and even anticipate those of the Persian Empire<sup>66</sup>. Quite the contrary: the power of the people makes the people feel empowered. It simply proves more efficient in a defensive warfare, on its own terrain, preferably at sea where all the sailors can help. Most important: democratic group effort within a *polis* offers a model for international relations among different *poleis*. The unfolding of history demonstrates that the Greeks become successful when they join their forces, combining the distinctive valor of each man and each city with the solidarity of a strong coalition, as it is the case at Salamis,

64. Cf. Herodotus, 9, 62-63, for the behavior of the Persian soldiers, on land, at Plataea.

65. Herodotus, 5, 97.

66. On Herodotus' intent to warn the Athenians about their own empire, see Charles FORNARA, *Herodotus: An Interpretative Essay*, Oxford, 1971; Kurt RAAFLAUB, « Herodotus, Political Thought and the Meaning of History », *Arethusa* 20, 1987, p. 221-224; John MOLES, « Herodotus Warns the Athenians », Francis CAIRNS and Malcolm HEATH (ed.), *Papers of the Leeds International Latin Seminar: Roman Poetry and Prose, Greek Poetry, Etymology, Historiography* 9, 1996, p. 259-284; *Idem*, « Herodotus and Athens », in Egbert BAKKER, Irene DE JONG et Hans VAN WEES (ed.), *The Brill's Companion to Herodotus*, Amsterdam, 2002, p. 33-52. For a more skeptical approach, which I favor, see Christopher PELLING, « Educating Croesus: Talking and Learning in Herodotus' Lydian *Logos* », *Classical Antiquity* 25, 2006, p. 141-177.

under the unifying leadership of Themistocles. We know that the creation of the Delian league will be the further application of that lesson. The Athenians will have understood how to balance the threat of the Great King, overcome their small size and become, at last, an intimidating power in the Mediterranean. They will do, in time, what the Greeks of the Ionian coast never brought themselves to do<sup>67</sup>.

This is why, in the *Histories*, we cannot take snap-shot portraits of « the Greeks ». They are characters in a movie. They change over time, and do not change all at the same pace, in Samos, Ionia, or Athens. Democracy has the last word because, seen in its historical process, it proves to have allowed a successful transition from unwilling obedience to individual motivation, from fragmentation to union, therefore from weakness to might. Here and now — Athens, in the second half of the fifth century — the power of the people is finally the winner, whereas the monarchy that Darius' horse had restarted in Susa, a century earlier, has revealed its fragility, along with the puerile tyranny of Peisistratus in Attica, and the vindictive despotism of Maeandrios in Samos.

### *Eirōneia*

It is this vision of history in movement that makes the whole narration profoundly ironic<sup>68</sup>, but full of a specific kind of irony: one that has a lot to do with the cosmopolitan broadmindedness of the traveler.

Before becoming, in later rhetoric, *dissimulatio*, that is a claim contrary to what one means, *eirōneia* consisted of the refusal to speak highly about one self<sup>69</sup>. It is an understatement about the speaker, and her authority in the enunciation; it is not an utterance about the world. A minimization of the self, it conveys a moral attitude. *Eirōneia* is the opposite of that vocal self-esteem which, for Plato, defines the ridicule and, for Aristotle, the unbecoming vice of the boastful character, « apt to claim the things that bring repute, when he has not got them, or to claim more than he has »<sup>70</sup>. With his constant belittlement of his own knowledge, which allows the beginning of a dialogue, Socrates is its most famous model.

67. Herodotus, 1, 170.

68. On Herodotus' irony, see Carolyn DEWALD, « The Figured Stage: Focalizing the Initial Narratives of Herodotus and Thucydides », in Thomas FAULKNER, Nancy FELSON, David KONSTAN, *Contextualizing Classics: Ideology, Performance, Dialogue: Essays in Honor of John J. Peradotto*, Lanhan, 1999.

69. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 4, 7, 1127 a 13-b 30.

70. *Ibid.*, 1127 a 21-22.

Now, ethnocentrism is nothing but a collective form of such *philautia*: shared, gregarious and vocal self-love. For Herodotus, this belief is universal, but it appears to be particularly stubborn, he claims, among the Persians. They measure the inferiority of other peoples, we have seen, in proportion to their *distance* from themselves, the best of the best. To lie far away is a guarantee of low value. We shall not be surprised to learn that the Persians are not great travelers abroad<sup>71</sup>.

In open contrast, the historian defines his inquiry in terms of mobility as much as ability to discover great and marvelous things, or people, wherever they might be.

Herodotus notoriously insists on his own autopsy<sup>72</sup> in India, Egypt, and Persia. Irrespective of its veracity, such a cognitive statement stands as a manifesto of worldliness. How could he have seen for himself, had he not gone to all those places? Autopsy presupposes exploration. The inquirer, *histôr*, casts himself as a nomadic collector of data: a reporter. His reminders that he covered those distances, and, as a consequence, he can now recount faithfully, are particularly emphatic, precisely when he has to acknowledge that the mores of the numerous non-Greeks he has gone out of his way, so to speak, to visit in person, can be excellent. Because he has set eyes on all these different people, Herodotus can apportion praise and blame liberally. Observed in situ, a lot of their features deserve high regard. This is true of his impressions on the Egyptians, or the Scythians, but it is particularly true in Persia. The pedagogic habits of the Persians meet with his approval; their sense of justice, his admiration. He can speak, he claims, because he has seen all this in person<sup>73</sup>. It is his field-work, he insists, that makes possible his open-mindedness.

Travel is what prevents sheer ignorance, of course, but also what creates the ability to capture the marvel of what is faraway — and not necessarily lesser than what lies under one's nose. Travel is incompatible with the parochial expectations of those who never move out of their reassuring environment, and therefore never put to the test the alleged shortcomings of those mysterious, and yet certainly despicable, people who live in distant lands. To go on journey means precisely to go across the space that separate aliens from us. It is what allows the inquirer to say: « I have seen

71. Herodotus, 3, 138.

72. James REDFIELD, « Herodotus the Tourist », *Classical Philology* 80, April 1985, p. 97-118; Guido SHEPENS, *L'autopsie dans la méthode des historiens grecs du v<sup>e</sup> siècle avant J.-C.*, Bruxelles, 1980; Catherine DARBO-PESCHANSKI, *Le discours du particulier: essai sur l'enquête hérodotéenne*, Paris, 1987.

73. Herodotus, 1, 137-140.



for myself » and what prevents him from simply looking down on those remote natives, on behalf of cultural narcissism. Voyages, therefore, are the ironic antidote to the lazy comfort of collective complacency: they are an exercise in *eironeia* because they allow a shift of praise, from one-self to others.

This becomes the pivotal point of Herodotus' ingenious, and disingenuous, ethnography. The Persians are great in all sorts of ways, he testifies. However, they make a big mistake: they are tremendously ethnocentric, and do not travel. They offer an extreme example of self-satisfied immobility. This proves fatal when their supposedly inferior neighbors become enemies. Then, cultural prejudices turn into poor military intelligence. Darius cannot make sense of the guerilla tactics of people who are constantly on the move, like the Scythians, those nomads who will elude him. Xerxes takes the Greeks too lightly.

Beyond the misleading polarity of Asia and Greece, we can see a subtler, and much more significant, face-to-face between the self-loving barbarians and a restless historian.

### *Indeterminacy*

I started by claiming that the Persian dialogue on the rule of one, a few or the many creates a moment on uncertainty, a thought experiment. I mentioned the notion of counterfactual. I am aware that the most recognizable forms of historical counterfactuals, alternative history or aborted history consist of iffy sentences. Nancy Demand<sup>74</sup> and, more recently, Yongle Zhang (PhD dissertation UCLA, 2008) have examined a considerable corpus of such sentences in the *Histories*, proving that Herodotus used extensively conditional imagination, in order to explain, and not simply describe, what actually happened. The most significant case is the projection of what would have ensued if the Athenians had not taken up the defense of the Greek cities, at sea — if there had been no Salamis.

And here I feel constrained to deliver an opinion, which most men, I know, will dislike, but which, as it seems to me to be true, I am determined not to withhold. Had the Athenians, from fear of the approaching danger, quitted their country, or had they without quitting it submitted to the power of Xerxes, there would certainly have been no attempt to resist the Persians by sea; in which case, the course of events by land would have been the following... If then a man should now say that the Athenians were the saviors of Greece, he would not exceed the truth. For they truly held the

74. Nancy DEMAND, « Herodotus' Encomium of Athens: Science or Rhetoric? », *The American Journal of Philology* 108, 1987, p. 746-758.

scales, and whichever side they espoused must have carried the day. They too it was who, when they had determined to maintain the *freedom* of Greece, roused up that portion of the Greek nation which had not gone over to the Medes, and so, next to the gods, they repulsed the invader. (7, 139)

This is a « falsifying » case of conditional history<sup>75</sup>. Quite a lot of specifiable information goes into the picture of what would have, plausibly, occurred. Pity and fear!

The debate is not an « if » sentence. But I hope to have argued persuasively that the impact of that scene upon the narrative of the wars does open up a hypothetical perspective, for a fifth-century listener. What if Otanes had prevailed? This is the unspoken « if » sentence, of the « truthifying » type. Well, we don't know, but look at Salamis, again! Look at the end of the story, as Solon would say.

An ominous decision — the preference for a monarchy, seen as a tyranny — causes the failure of the Persian Empire, in its expansion toward the West. An autocratic regime is fragile, the story will demonstrate, because blind not merely to its own fragility, but also to the might of its opponents. A king, relying on the size of his forces, the centralization of his command, and the discipline imposed on his soldiers, can miscalculate the conditions of success. For all their intelligence and preparations, Darius and Xerxes will misjudge the political principles — and therefore underestimate the military resources — of their enemy. The noble Persians who, in that instant of uncertainty, opt for monarchy as usual, rule out the trial of a political form which, for Herodotus, happens to be not only just, but the most efficient for military success. What they fail to understand is the most realistic aspect of the power of the people: power in war. And, from that moment, the narration of the conflict will prove how, after having wasted the chance of innovation in that foundational discussion, the Persian kings and their most influential advisors keep missing the point of democracy.

Understood as a counterfactual meditation on the future of the Empire, the Persian dialogue on the three types of government resonates as a structural support of the plot. It invites us to see the war as the momentous acting out of a contrast which is, first of all, political. Empire versus *polis*; monarchy versus democracy; despotism versus freedom: Persians and Greeks face each other, with two distinctive identities. Beyond all their ethnographic peculiarities, such as language, religion, or manners, they

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75. Nicholas RESCHER, *Conditionals*, Cambridge Mass., 2007, p. 177-184.

diverge *politically*. This is the difference that causes the collision of the two armies and, finally, the defeat of the Empire. This is the big picture. But the big picture can prove fatally misleading for the full understanding of a text that makes no provincial judgments, only subtle and intricate comparisons.

The story of the Persian wars follows a line, but the narration manages to avoid the pitfall of finalism. Herodotus' recollection is retrospective but it does not obliterate contingency, uncertainty and over-determination; the tale recovers what finally occurred, but without rationalizing that outcome as the inevitable actualization of a unique potential. There are many possibilities, many paths non-taken, and many aborted projects, in the course of time. These developments that at some point were at hand, but were never brought to fruition, deserve to be recorded, together with what actually happened. Conflicting opinions in lengthy deliberations, along with the competing interpretations of dreams and oracles, or the discarded recommendations of various advisors, are also facts, and are worth recalling. These too are memorable « deeds », intertwined with other deeds.

This is why, while giving us reading directions, the constitutional debate offers also a model of Herodotus' historical writing. The debate ends with the choice of monarchy, it is true, but it has also been an exercise in cultural imagination, a glimpse into alien political creativity. Those noble Persians could, indeed, go as far as to contemplate other possibilities: it was *not* impossible! This is what Herodotus emphasizes for the skeptics. And because it is introduced with this emphatic comment, the scene should alert us to that sense of possibility, beyond the stereotypes and expectations of a Panglossian (or pan-Hellenic) vision of the world. Those who cannot believe that such a Greek dialogue might take place in Persia, are committed to a predictable history of the Persian Empire *ex post facto*, and, also, to a predictable characterization of the Persians. Herodotus' narrative method performs a critique of teleonomy and, at the same time, of cultural narcissism. Had Otanes prevailed in 522 BCE, he would have been a Persian Cleisthenes, *ante litteram*! This is the unconventional thought we are invited to entertain.

Far from being there just to please a Greek audience, the constitutional debate challenges us: this text, we are told, displays the great deeds of two peoples, the Barbarians and the Hellenes. It is a recounting of the past and an account of ethnic diversity. The ethnographic component, we know, is not limited to decorative digressions, since peoples come on

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stage as characters, involved in all those great things they do. And yet, those characters are not the unsurprising authors of foreseeable acts. In the agency of the Persians, there is space for disagreements, individual agendas, changes of heart and dramatic hesitations. And we, « Greek » readers have to rise to the occasion and expect the unexpected, for example the *invention of democracy* — nothing less — circa fifteen years before Cleisthenes' reforms, in the mind of a Persian aristocrat.