

A PROBLEM CHILD: HERODOTUS AND THE
YOUNG ATHENIAN DEMOCRACY¹

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I

‘The time will come when you Corinthians, more than anyone else, will yearn for the Peisistratids, when the moment arrives for you to be pained at the hands of the Athenians’ (5.93.1). Strong, ominous words: they are uttered by Hippias, the exiled ex-tyrant of Athens, in or around 504 BCE, when Soclees of Corinth – if that was his name; maybe Sosicles – had been urging Sparta *not* to do anything to curb the young Athenian democracy, just a few years after Cleisthenes had set it all in motion. And Hippias should know: Herodotus adds that he had a closer knowledge of the relevant oracles than any man alive. Herodotus’ first audiences would have known what this prophecy referred to, especially those who heard or read him in the 420s, the time when his text is usually thought to have taken its final form. After various ups and downs, mainly downs, during the *pentekontaetia*, relations between Athens and Corinth had hit a new low in the 430s. We know about it all from the first book of Thucydides. First there was the Corcyra affair: as Herodotus himself notes elsewhere (3.49.1), Corinth had long been on bad terms with her colony and daughter-city

¹ This is a lightly edited version of my plenary talk at the VCN Nazomerconferentie at Nunspeet, 21–22 September 2018. It was a privilege and a delight to mix with so many enthusiastic Dutch teachers of Classics, and I am most grateful for the invitation. Several of the themes of the paper are developed more fully in my *Herodotus and the Question Why*, to be published in 2019 by the University of Texas Press: the reader is referred to that book for fuller references to modern scholarship.

Corcyra, and by the mid-430s this was coming to a head over Corcyra's own daughter-city Epidamnus. Corcyra persuaded a slightly reluctant Athens to take her side, and Athenian and Corinthian ships ended up fighting one another. Then there was Potidaea, another Corinthian colony and another case where Athens and Corinth became involved in direct confrontation with one another. The result was the great debate of the Peloponnesian allies that forms the centre-piece of Thucydides 1, and that took place on the initiative of the Corinthians. They were then the ones urging Sparta to intervene, and they won the day. So by then the roles would be quite reversed: Corinth would be the warmongers rather than the peacemakers; and they would be speaking against Athens, not protecting her.

History is full of ironies, indeed, and can take strange turns; and mutability is a favoured Herodotean theme. Still, more than this is added by that contemporary pointer. It casts the shadow of the future over this whole debate; it underlines not just what Athens has been up to in the few years since Cleisthenes' reforms but also what Athens would grow to be – a mighty state, and one that causes 'pain' to those who get in her way.

There was something of that forward gaze already when Herodotus summarised the effect of democracy at 5.78, not many chapters ago:

It is clearly a universal truth, not just a matter of one single case, that equality of speech (ἰσηγορίη) is something to be taken seriously, if the Athenians too were no better in war than any of their neighbours as long as they were under tyrannical rule, but once they were rid of the tyrants became vastly pre-eminent. That shows that while they were held down (κατεχόμενοι) they willingly played the coward because they were working for a master, but once they were free each wanted to achieve something for himself.

(5.78)

‘Vastly pre-eminent’: that was not really true by 504 but would be the case soon enough, and evidently those neighbours, in the past a match for Athens, were now going to be the losers. And there is much the same before Marathon, when Miltiades is urging the polemarch Callimachus to fight rather than delay:

It is all up to you, Callimachus: you will either be reducing Athens to slavery or making her free, and leaving a memorial of yourself such as not even Harmodius and Aristogeiton left behind. This is the greatest crisis the Athenians have ever faced. If they bow down before the Medes, their fate has already been decided. They will be handed over to Hippias. But if this city survives, it can become the first city of all Greece. ... If you come over to my view, you have a city that is free and the first among the cities of Greece; but if you choose the proposal of those who want to avoid fighting, you will have the opposite of every good thing that I have said.

(6.109.3, 6)

‘First among the cities of Greece’: it is not just fighting the Persian that is in point, but the pre-eminence among the Greek states that is to come.

What has made the difference? What *we* would naturally say is ‘democracy’: after all, the 2500th anniversary of the Cleisthenic reforms was celebrated in a big way in 1993 in terms of ‘democracy’s birth’.² That is not wholly wrong, as we will see – but Herodotus himself does not put it like that, at least at first. In his account of Cleisthenes’ reforms Herodotus had not talked about democracy at all but phrased it in terms of the tribes that he established (5.69–70). The word used in 5.78 is *ισηγورίη*, freedom of speech; Soclees himself puts it as *ισοκρατίη*, equality in power (5.92a.1). Similarly, when Otanes is arguing for what is clearly democracy in the constitutions debate he does not use *δημοκρατίη* but speaks more generally of ‘the many ruling’ (*πλήθος δὲ ἄρχον*) and of ‘increasing the power of the many’ (*τὸ πλήθος ἀέξειν*): for

² Cf. Grofman 1993, an introductory summary to a collection of essays in a special commemorative edition of *PS: Political Science and Politics*; Hansen 1994.

him what has ‘the fairest name of all’ is not δημοκρατίη but ἰσονομίη, not quite ‘equality before the law’ – even at Athens, for instance, zeugitai were only admitted to the archonship in 457–6, and thetai not even then³ – but ‘equal access to the law’, an acknowledgement that the laws embrace you along with all the others (3.80.6, 83.1).⁴ That is typical elsewhere too. When Maeandrius at Samos or Aristagoras in Miletus offers to give up their rule it is in both cases put in terms of ‘establishing ἰσονομίη’ (3.142, 5.37.2). Yet when he later returns both to Otanes and to Cleisthenes he makes no bones about it: Otanes’ proposal was that ‘the Persians should have democratic rule’, δημοκρατέεσθαι Πέρσας (6.43.3), and Herodotus there defends that version by pointing out that Mardonius ‘imposed democracies’, δημοκρατίας, on the cities of Ionia; Cleisthenes is the one ‘who established the tribes and the democracy at Athens’ (6.131).

So Herodotus clearly knows the word δημοκρατίη, and knows what is at stake: why, then, does he initially avoid the word? One reason is emotive. For us, ‘democracy’ is a good word (though many of us have had our moments of doubt over Brexit). Not so then: it was a dangerous new experiment, and those who were in favour or wanted to put a positive gloss on it might naturally find a comfier way of putting it. The *iso-* formulations, especially ἰσονομίη, are always or nearly always hurrah-words, not boo-words, and that does matter. It is only in retrospect, once passions have cooled, that the narrator himself can bring out that this had really been at stake.

³ *Ath. pol.* 26.2: cf. Rhodes 1981 on *Ath. pol.* 7.4.

⁴ ‘The term reflects the political norms and regulations by which ruler and ruled are equally bound, the statutes which are valid and binding equally on both’, Ostwald 1969: 120.

There is a second reason too. These *iso-* words draw attention as much to what they are *not* as to what they are: they are not tyranny. A drinking song celebrated Harmodius and Aristogeiton ‘when they killed the tyrant and made Athens *isonomoi*’ (*PMG* 896), and Euripides’ Jocasta responds to her ambitious son Eteocles’ paeon on ‘Tyranny, biggest of the gods’ with an even more eloquent speech in praise of *Isotēs*, Equality (*Phoen.* 528–85). Tyranny is important in all these Herodotean contexts: the tyranny of the Peisistratids from which Athens had been freed and which Soclees now sees the Spartans trying to reinstate; the tyranny from which the Persians had just escaped when Otanes was speaking; the tyranny that Aristagoras and Maeandrius were offering to give up. That contrast with tyranny is also the central idea of a passage that 5.78 is echoing, 5.66.1 – ‘Athens was great before, but now that it was rid of the tyrants became much greater’. And tyranny is evidently the important contrast in that speech of Miltiades to Callimachus: which is it to be, freedom or slavery to the Persian king? Now is your chance to win everlasting fame to rival those great liberators Harmodius and Aristogeiton, and we know how they won their own glory – by killing the Peisistratid Hipparchus.

I am not going to suggest that democracy is irrelevant in those contexts. If it had been, Herodotus would not have been so clear-cut in using the term in those later retrospects. But it is important that freedom comes first. We should notice too that this is not just to be a freedom from outside constraints, but a freedom that goes on to impose its will on others – to think and behave in the terms of Plato’s Callicles in the *Gorgias*, who believes that the truly free person will cast off all external restraints and be strong enough to impose his will on others. Freedom, it is clear, is a continuum: once you have cast off the yoke of being under the subjection of others, you don’t stop there, but carry on and go on to dominate first your neighbours (5.78), then go on

to be ‘the first city of Greece’ (6.109). There is a classic modern distinction, a favourite especially of Isaiah Berlin, between ‘freedom from’ and ‘freedom to’:⁵ freedom from having to do what others want, freedom to do whatever one wants to do oneself. The barrier between the two can be a hard one to fix, but this Athens will not be keen on observing a barrier at all.

II

Let us go back to 5.92, and remind ourselves what Soclees has said, and why this meeting is taking place at all.⁶ Tyranny is central here as well. Sparta played a leading role in the liberation of Athens and the expulsion of the Peisistratids, but there have been various brushes since then, starting in the aftermath of the liberation when the Spartan king Cleomenes tried unsuccessfully to intervene in support of Cleisthenes’ adversary Isagoras. Since then Athens has been on the up and up, winning various victories over their neighbours just as 5.78 says – Boeotians, Chalcidians, and now they are preparing to move against Aegina. Meanwhile Sparta has discovered that there was something shady about the Delphic oracles that had led her to intervene against the Peisistratids (a bribe or so from the Alcmaeonids was said to be involved), and Cleomenes has got hold of various oracles foretelling dire trouble for Sparta at Athens’ hands:

So now they had knowledge of those oracles, and also saw that the Athenians were getting more powerful and had no intention of doing the Spartans’ bidding. They reflected that the Attic people, now that it was free, might become their

⁵ The classic treatment is that of Berlin’s 1958 inaugural Oxford lecture on ‘two concepts of liberty’, distinguishing ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ liberty (Berlin–Hardy 2002: 166–217).

⁶ On 5.92 see esp. Moles 2007 and the commentary of Hornblower 2013: 246–67.

equal in power, whereas it had been weak and obedient when it had been held down [κατεχόμενον again] by the tyranny: so they summoned Hippias to come from Sigeium, and when he arrived they called a convention of messengers from their allies.

(5.91.1)

Look what we have done! We have delivered the city to an ‘ungrateful *dēmos*’ (so there is here a stress on the democratic aspect of Cleisthenes’ reforms, 5.91.2); now that this *dēmos* has ‘popped its head up’ (ἀνέκυψε), it is treating us and our king hybridically, and the Athenians’ arrogance has grown with their power. So come on, let’s go in and put Hippias back into power. And Hippias himself is there in the background, waiting for that moment when he will speak: but first he has to listen while Soclees delivers his diatribe on the terrible evils that tyranny brings.

For that is what Soclees’ speech amounts to: ‘nothing,’ he says, ‘in the world is more unjust or more bloody’. You Spartans can only be thinking in these terms because you’ve no personal experience of what tyranny is like: if you knew tyranny the way we know tyranny, you’d never suggest such a thing – a passage that is echoed two books later when some Spartan envoys respond to the solicitation of a Persian satrap by telling him ‘if you knew freedom the way we know freedom, you’d fight for it not just with spears but with axes too’ (7.135.3). Tyranny, but the Spartans don’t know it; freedom, but the Persians don’t know it: those two contrasting poles again. Then Soclees goes on to his case studies. The first centres on Cypselus of Corinth, though not on his bad behaviour: that is taken for granted. The point is that the ruling Bacchiadae missed their chance to avoid it. Oracles had warned them about the threat to come from the newborn baby, and a death-squad was sent in to deal with him. But the baby smiled, and the first killer could not bring himself to do it; then the same happened to the second, and then the third, then all the ten – a good smiler, that baby.

They all berated one another, and determined to go back in and do it all together: but by now the mother had heard them, and when they went back the baby was nowhere to be found, hidden safely away in a chest, a *κυψέλη*.

His reign was bad. His successor Periander was no better – we already know something of that from Book 3 – and he provides Soclees with his second case-study, his message to Thrasybulus, tyrant of Miletus – tyrants tend to stick together – and his request for advice. Thrasybulus simply took the bemused messenger through the corn-field, lopping off the tallest stalks. Periander got the point, and got rid of the most prominent citizens. Finally – and this is the third case-study – he humiliated all the women of Corinth, inviting them to a festival and then ordering them to strip off all the fine clothes that they had put on for the occasion: this was because his dead wife Melissa had demanded these as an offering because ‘he had put his loaves in a cold oven’ (5.92ε.2), that is he had had sex with her corpse after her death. Not nice, not nice at all.

In a way, this is filling out for Herodotus’ audience something that had already been said about tyranny in the constitutions debate in Book 3. Otanes had framed his speech too as an attack on tyranny: not even the best of men could resist the temptations of tyranny ... he is jealous of the best of his subjects if they survive alive ... he goes against all law and tradition, he is brutal to women, he kills people without trial (3.80).⁷ These are now the examples to prove the case, or at least prove that it can be the case (for not all tyrants are like that, and Herodotus can give credit to tyrants when it is due; the problem is that it is so rarely due).

The first thing to note is that Soclees is trying to learn from history, and from narrative: in his case, from the past that he and his countrymen have experienced

⁷ I discuss Otanes’ speech and the constitution debate more fully in Pelling 2002.

themselves. He is not the only speaker in Herodotus who tells a tale like this and extracts a moral, rather in the manner of a speaker in Homer delivering an αἶνος – Phoenix, say, or Nestor, who can do a ‘I remember the day when...’ line so well; Leutychidas of Sparta does the same at 6.86. The contrast with Thucydides’ manner is very plain.⁸ The Persian Artabanus also strains to learn from experience, in that case his experience with Darius in Scythia, when warning Xerxes against his expedition (7.10); earlier Croesus had tried to do the same when advising Cyrus (1.207). And in a way that is what Herodotus himself is trying to do with the text as a whole, telling an elaborate tale and – so most readers have thought – trying to extract a moral from it, or at least to sense something of a pattern in the way that events have played out. Like the Spartans or later the Persians, most of Herodotus’ readers and hearers have no personal experience of the sort of calamities and triumphs that Herodotus is telling them about; but still, they have ears to hear and eyes to read what he has said, and this may educate them beyond the range of what they know at first hand.

But if there is a moral here to be extracted from those case-studies, what is it? The moral that the internal audience – the Spartans and the other Peloponnesians – draw is an easy one: tyranny is bad and should not be supported. The other Peloponnesians had initially kept quiet – something that itself captures something about leadership and power: they had not dared to speak out. But now that Soclees had spoken freely, every representative there broke silence and supported him. Freely, ἐλευθέρως: that choice of word is telling. This is how free debate ought to work, the opposite of what happens in a tyranny (and often enough in other sequences we see how nervous and apprehensive courtiers become about speaking out in disagreement with their tyrant ruler). And Sparta goes along with them, abandoning its original

⁸ Cf. Hornblower 2013: 246–7.

intention. There is a Homeric echo here that not merely marks the momentousness of the occasion but also suggests an interesting comparison, as intertextuality and allusion so often does. Soclees had closed his speech by calling on ‘the gods of Greece’, and calling on the Spartans to desist: ‘be sure that the Corinthians at least will not approve if you do’. Three times in the *Iliad* we have heard something similar, but there it is indeed in the world of the gods: each time it is Zeus who has a plan to do something – to save Troy, or his son Sarpedon, or Hector – and in each case Hera or Athena warns him not to: ‘go ahead if you want to: but not all we other gods will approve’ (ἔρδ’· ἀτὰρ οὐ τοι πάντες ἐπαινέομεν θεοὶ ἄλλοι, *Iliad* 4.29, 16.443, 22.181). That, I think we feel in the *Iliad*, is the way a leader like Zeus ought to behave: he is strong enough to yield to divine public opinion without any danger that his authority will be compromised by it. We can contrast a leader like Agamemnon on earth, who has no hesitation in going against public opinion. Zeus can yield because he remains, unmistakably, the strongest; Agamemnon is not, and all he can do is bluster.

So much for the internal audience. What about the external audience, Herodotus’ readers and hearers? Is there a moral for them to draw too about Athens, particularly as the debate is so much about tyranny and particularly, as we have seen, because the shadow of Athens’ future greatness hangs over it all? The idea of Athens as ‘the tyrant city’ comes out strongly in Thucydides. His Pericles tells the Athenians that ‘your empire is *like* a tyranny’ (2.63.2), and Cleon strengthens that to ‘your empire *is* a tyranny’ (3.37.2); later Euphemus, their ambassador in Sicily to persuade Camarina into an alliance, says bluntly that ‘for a man who is a tyrant or a city that holds an empire, nothing is unreasonable provided it is expedient ...’ (6.85.1). But it is not just Thucydides. In Aristophanes’ *Knights* of 424 BCE – more or less the time

that most scholars think that Herodotus' *Histories* was finally 'published' in something like the form that we have it – the chorus of knights address Demos in the same terms:

Oh Demos, what a lovely empire you have, when all men fear you just like a tyrant....

(*Knights* 1111–4)

That idea was clearly in the air, and most of Herodotus' audience will have been familiar with it. It certainly adds an extra perspective to the issue now: by refusing to reinstall one tyrant, Hippias, in the present, the Peloponnesians may be preparing the way for an even more damaging tyrant, Athens herself, in the future, a leader far less deferential to its allies' wishes than Sparta is here. As Euphemus says, the city's own interests are the only things that matter, tyrant-like, to an imperial city.

That makes the analogy with the infant Cypselus even more disturbing. Might we even conclude that Sparta now got it wrong, just as the death-squad missed their chance with the deceptively smiling baby: that it would have saved everyone a lot of trouble if both the infant Cypselus and the infant Athenian democracy had been strangled at birth? We might think of the chorus in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, likening the hated Helen to a lion-cub:

There was once a man who raised a lion-cub in his home: it had got no milk from its mother but was still fond of the breast, tame in those early days of life, a good friend of children, a joy to the aged. It was often in their arms just like a new-born child, smiling bright-eyed and fawning to the hand for the food that it needed. Time passed, and it showed the character it had from its parents. Unbidden, it made a feast by killing the flock: that was the gratitude shown to those who had reared it. The house ran with blood; the household faced overwhelming grief, a great massacre of harm. It had been reared by a god as some priest of Havoc for the house.

(Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 717–36)

Mirroring points could be made about Paris as well as Helen. In Euripides' *Trojan Women* there is a furious debate between Hecuba and Helen, with Menelaus as judge. Hecuba wants Helen killed for all the grief she has brought; Helen pleads for her life. It is not her fault, she claims: there are echoes there of Gorgias' epideictic defence of Helen, but at one point she goes even further than she does in Gorgias' version.

Initially it was Hecuba's own fault, or so Helen says:

She was the one who gave birth to the origin of the trouble, bearing Paris. In the second place the destroyer of Troy, and of me, was the old man who did not then kill the child, that terrible version of a firebrand, this Paris.

(Euripides, *Trojan Women* 919–21)

A little harsh, one might think, but it might have seemed less so to the original audience; for the first play of the trilogy had dealt in more detail with Hecuba's dream that she would give birth to a firebrand. Interpreters said that the child should be killed and Priam had the boy exposed, but herdsmen found the baby and he duly grew to manhood in the glens of Ida. It is easy enough to see the baby Cypselus in the same light as Helen or Paris, as a case where it would have been so much better if he had been killed at birth. Are we to infer the same about Athens?

My own picture of Herodotus would not make his moralism or his politics so simple, particularly as that initial stress has fallen not on democracy but on freedom. There is no doubt in the later books what Herodotus thinks about that: those who fight for freedom are 'those who took the better view about Greece' (7.145.1); when Cleomenes moves against the Medizing Aeginetans he is 'laying the preliminaries for the good of Greece' (6.61.1). This is the Athens that would at Marathon give a lead to the great Greek struggle against Persia. Herodotus is even more emphatic in Book 7,

giving vent at some length to a view that ‘I know will cause resentment to most people’ – but, he insists, it really was Athens who should be credited as ‘the saviours of Greece’, because if they had deserted the cause in 480 Xerxes would have won (7.139). Whatever else we are going to conclude from 5.92, it is not going to be that the Greek world would have been better without Athens at all.

III

Let us have a closer look at freedom, and bring back democracy into the discussion after all: for even if Soclees and perhaps even Cleisthenes were not particularly connecting democracy and freedom in the last decade of the sixth century, it is likely that the two were felt to be connected by the time of Herodotus’ history. Kurt Raaflaub has argued that the connection began in the third quarter of the fifth century;⁹ I am not happy with all of his arguments,¹⁰ but that general picture is as plausible as any. ‘Democracy’ n’ freedom’ – one hears that phrase so often in modern political rhetoric that it sounds like a single word, and already by the fourth century Aristotle could say, admittedly in a slightly weary and sceptical tone, that

Freedom is the foundational principle of democracy: that is what they usually say, implying that this is the only constitution where people have a share in freedom.

⁹ Raaflaub 2004 (German original 1985): esp. 203–49. The association of the two is not found in our sources before about 430, but Raaflaub argues (esp. 205–21) that the 440s provided a historical context where the connection might easily take root in partisan exchanges between the elite, defending the ‘freedom’ with which they had become familiar, and champions of the *dēmos*, arguing that only under democracy can their freedom be defended.

¹⁰ We should not, for instance, draw any conclusions from the absence of the idea from Herodotus’ constitutions debate (*pace* Raaflaub 206–7): it is perilous to associate that debate with any date earlier than the rest of the *Histories*, and anyway Otanes’ house alone ‘remained free’ as a result of his democratic stand, 3.83.3.

(Arist. *Pol.* 6.1317a40–43)

In one way, study of Herodotus can be a valuable inoculation against that lazy conflation of democracy and freedom, for most of the states struggling to remain free were anything but democracies, and Greek oligarchs and even tyrants can use freedom rhetoric just as readily as democratic Athens. Thus this Soclees who speaks ‘freely’ and is so anti-tyrannical is the representative of Corinth, probably at the time an ‘unusually narrow oligarchy’,¹¹ and ‘the tyrants of Cyprus’ speak resonantly to their Ionian allies of the prospect that ‘Ionia and Cyprus might be free’ (5.109.2). But at least one can begin to see how the conflation could come about, not least because both freedom and democracy could, in their different ways, be seen as the opposite pole from tyranny, freedom as opposed to enslavement, the rule of the many as opposed to the one. So is it as simple as tyranny bad, democracy good, just as freedom is good? We shall see; there at least that shadow of Athens’ coming domination and bullying might make one hesitate.

Freedom is good – and yes, there is no doubt that Herodotus’ heart is behind Greece as it struggles to defend its freedom against the threat of Persian ‘slavery’. But freedom has its downsides too, and Herodotus has no illusions about those. Take the conversation that Xerxes has with Demaratus, the exiled king of Sparta who is following in his retinue. Xerxes is confident that, with all his numerical supremacy, he is bound to win. Would you willingly fight against even ten men, Demaratus? What sticks in the mind is Demaratus’ reply: no, he wouldn’t do that willingly – in fact, given the choice, he wouldn’t even fight against one. But don’t underestimate the Spartans: for, sire, they have a master whom they fear even more than your subjects fear you, and that master is law. Its instructions are always the same, and that is never

¹¹ Salmon in *OCD*⁴: cf. Salmon 1984: 231–9.

to flee but to stand one's ground and to conquer or to die. The words prepare for Thermopylae, that is clear. But it is important what Xerxes has said too:

Come, let us be reasonable. How could a thousand, ten thousand, even fifty thousand oppose an army as big as this, given that they are all alike free and are not ruled by a single man? We outnumber them by more than a thousand to one, as they number five thousand. If they were under a single ruler as we are, there is a chance that they might be so afraid of him that they would outstrip their own nature, and go against a larger enemy force when driven forward by the whip. But as it is they are let loose to be free, and would not do either.

(7.103.3–4)

Xerxes is thinking in Persian, as that mention of the whip shows: that is a Persian speciality, and will duly be used at Thermopylae, whipping the rear ranks to go forward (7.223). Eventually, he is wrong about the enemy's vulnerability, for the reasons that Demaratus goes on to give. But he is not *that* wrong. He is right about the cohesion that a single command can give; he will also be right later in insisting that his men fight more valiantly when the king is there to observe them in action (8.69.2, cf. 8.86). On the other side, the Greek alliance is in perpetual danger of breaking up, with wrangle after wrangle over the right strategy to follow; and indeed it is easy to lose track of the fact that more Greek states went over to the Persians than stood their ground and resisted. It is the other side, in fact, of that point made at 5.78: when people are free, they know they are fighting for their own interests rather than for a master; but if you happen to be in the way of the oncoming Persian giant, or if you think your state would be best served by departing back into the Peloponnese and leaving Athens to its fate, all the pressures are to abandon a unified course rather than stick to it. Many of the factors of 480 had already been in place fourteen years earlier, at the Battle of Lade during the Ionian Revolt – a fleet on a similar scale to that of Salamis, a charismatic leader who knew what needed doing, a sound of inspirational

freedom rhetoric: but that alliance collapsed and the result was a calamity. So, very easily, might Salamis have been; so might Plataea, where the Greek tactics on the day were a total shambles, and even Spartan discipline wholly collapsed. Eventually the alliance held, and Greece won; but only just, and that ‘only justness’ is as important an emphasis as the victory itself.

There are paradoxes too in the way that freedom wins. The inspirational aspect is not to be denied or minimised. People are, indeed, fighting for themselves, not for a master. But the crucial battle of 480 is fought at Salamis, even though many of the allies favoured retreat inside the Peloponnese; and what carries the day in the unruly and chaotic Greek debate is Themistocles’ threat that, unless they decide to fight there, the Athenian fleet will simply sail away (8.62). What convinces Xerxes too to fight there is Themistocles’ message that the Greeks are planning to do exactly that, to sail away so that he will lose his chance to crush them now (8.75). The threat to the Greeks and the message to the enemy can both be believed because they are so credible, and indeed there is a good deal more truth in Themistocles’ message than falsity: any Greek city just is that free – free enough to sail away. And why is it that the Greeks have so many ships anyway? It is because Themistocles has managed to persuade the Athenians to build them, but that was not for this war: the Greek states were then busy with their own affairs, and the enemy of the moment was Aegina (7.144). Hate thy neighbour: the Greek states were good at that, with that fierce independence that went with freedom. It is not the best aspects of Greek freedom that win the day, it is the worst.

What, finally, about democracy? Certainly, everyone now thinks that they have a stake in their city’s success, but inspiration is not the only thing that Herodotus thinks about democracy. Narrative juxtapositions in Herodotus are rarely random, and

only a few pages after Soclees' speech we hear of Aristagoras' visit to Athens. He has already been to Sparta, and failed to persuade the Spartan king Cleomenes to intervene in the Ionian Revolt. Now he comes to the Athenian assembly to see if he has any better luck with them.

It seems to be an easier matter to deceive a crowd than a single individual, if Aristagoras was unable to deceive the one man Cleomenes of Sparta, but could do so to 30,000 Athenians.

(5.97.2)

So the Athenians took their fateful decision to send aid to the Ionian Revolt; and 'these ships were the beginning of evils (ἀρχὴ κακῶν) for Greeks and barbarians' (5.97.3) – a modern-day equivalent of those Homeric 'evil-beginning ships' that brought Helen to Troy (νήες ἀρχέκακοι, *Il.* 5.63), with the allusion marking the solemnity of the moment. Not that they stay long: within a page the Athenians are 'forsaking the Ionians completely' (5.103.1). But the damage is done. We are on the path to Marathon, an exploit that turns out to be glorious for Athens but could so easily have been catastrophic.

All this makes it very difficult to answer the old question whether Herodotus is pro- or anti-democracy, much more difficult than to say whether he is pro- or anti-freedom. Perhaps we should adopt a different way of looking at it. One reason he is so interested in Persia is that Persia offers the extreme case of tyranny, the most massive concentration of power in a single person.¹² Not that Persia was the only tyranny, of course: in fact the great majority of tyrants in Herodotus are Greek ones, though many

¹² Cf. Dewald 2003 on the way that Herodotus uses Persian tyranny to construct a 'despotic template' against which the diverse and often idiosyncratic Greek tyrants can be gauged.

are ruling with Persian support.¹³ But Xerxes and his predecessors were so much more powerful than those Greek counterparts, and provided the clearest test-case for the way humans behave when they have so much power and can do whatever they want. There is the danger of madness, with Cambyses; there is the danger that a run of success will lead them to take on one military enterprise too far; there is the extreme difficulty for courtiers to give good advice or for kings to listen, as we see advisers so often having to tiptoe around issues for fear of telling the great man something he does not want to hear. It is never easy to speak truth to power: it is not easy for Soclees of Corinth; but nowhere is it harder than in the Persian court. Greek debate can be a travesty because it is so unruly, as in the discussion before Salamis, with more free speech than it can comfortably handle. Persian debate is so often a travesty because it is not free at all, with the wisest heads having to hold their tongues. Persia, then, is the test-case for seeing how tyranny works, just as tyranny itself offers the test-case for exploring what happens when a human has the ultimate possibilities for self-gratification. For similar reasons Plato sometimes takes a tyrant as a test-case, as for instance in the *Gorgias*.¹⁴ It offers the clarity of extremes.

Democracy offers the opposite. It allows a prism for seeing freedom pushed to the limit, just as tyranny allowed a prism looking at unbridled power. Tyranny is the rule of one, democracy of the many. Tyranny suppresses; democracy equalises (those *iso-* words). Tyranny serves the tyrant; in a democracy everyone is ‘trying to achieve something for himself’. Free peoples can make mistakes: 30,000 people are more likely to make them than one. Free debate can be rowdy, and lead to decisions of which people swiftly repent; a democracy may be specially prone to that, as the

¹³ In Waters’ list of 55 tyrants (1971: 42–4) 21 are marked as ‘Persian-supported or nominated’.

¹⁴ Plato *Gorg.* 470c–71d, cf. 525d; cf. *Rpb.* 1.344a–c, *Apol.* 40d, *Euthyd.* 274a.

experience of the infant (and later the adult) Athenian democracy may suggest. None of these features, good or bad, is *confined to* democracy: debate was rowdy enough, and changes of mind quick enough, in that debate of the coalition commanders before Salamis. Nor is internal squabbling, or allowing internal squabbles to compromise national interests, any more characteristic of democracies than anywhere else. Still, in their different ways both tyranny and democracy allow that clarity of extremes.

How will it all end? How, Herodotus' readers and hearers might ask, is history going to play out in their own day, deep into the Peloponnesian War and a conflict whose end was very difficult to predict? Persia's attack had ended in failure in 490 and 480–79: Greek freedom had won. Will the experiment of Athenian democracy and Athenian empire turn out to have a different end? Or will it be the same, because the underlying imperialistic urge is so similar – for we remember that Athens is the 'tyrant city' as well as the acme of democracy? And could anyone in Herodotus' day, Herodotus himself included, possibly know? The answers to those questions were still unclear when the first audiences heard or read his work, and I do not think the hearing or reading could give a clear pointer to how it was likely to turn out. The point is rather that, whatever the answer turned out to be, the strengths and weaknesses of freedom would do something to make either Athens' success or its failure more comprehensible. If Athens lost, it would be because the imperialistic drive bridged both tyrannies and democracies, with a successful power eventually going one step too far: 'Sicily', an audience after 413 might think. If Athens won, it might be because this empire and this 'tyrant city' was different after all, possibly because it was democratic and because its ruling people had such a strong sense of self-belief: 'Pericles' funeral speech', an audience that had heard it might think, if it was anything like the version we have in Thucydides. Nothing was yet predictable. That did not

mean that the outcome, when it came, would be inexplicable, and pondering the story that Herodotus had told and the insights it could offer might help readers to understand whatever that outcome turned out to be.¹⁵

¹⁵ Dewald 1997 rightly stresses the importance of such future audiences, ones that would know as Herodotus could not know the outcome of the Peloponnesian War.

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