

The Problem with Political Forms in Herodotus' Histories: A Comparative Look

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Abstract. Herodotus, the father of history, is the first writer to describe the Asia-Europe division, based on which he delineates and analyzes the cross-continental relationship between East and West with a focus on the Greco-Persian Wars that took place in the 5th century BCE and lasts for roughly five decades. His attitude towards the Greco-Persian Wars in the Histories has long intrigued the attention of scholars. This paper attempts to show how Herodotus initiates the geographical distinction that lays the groundwork for the discussion of political forms— one of Herodotus' central concerns in the work that he deems crucial to the progression and result of the Wars. The paper first analyzes Herodotus' narrative of the Persian constitutional debate and the Hellenic discourse on democratic freedom. In conclusion, it is ultimately the inveterate ideological disparities between Persia and the Greek states and their different regimes approve of that determined the final results of the Greco-Persian Wars.

Keywords: Herodotus, Geoco-Persian wars, Political form.

1. Introduction

Written around 430 BCE, Herodotus' *Histories* records a detailed account of the Greco-Persian Wars and the complicated and often polarized relationship between East and West, most notably in their contrasting political culture. By examining this political duality based on Herodotus' description, a closer look will be focused on the Greco-Persian Wars, whose result demonstrates the cultural and political disparities between Persia and the Greek coalition. The paper focuses on establishing the East-West opposition in Herodotus' *Histories*. First, the paper dives into the political and cultural disparities between Persia and the Greek coalition, the two sides of the Persian Wars, and then evaluate the outcome of Herodotus' thematic Wars based on the problem of political forms.

2. East-West Duality in Herodotus' Histories

The Asia-Europe dichotomy is pointed out multiple times in the book. Apart from Herodotus' overt distinction between the Greeks and the barbarians in the opening paragraph, he attributes the Hellenic-Asiatic conflict to their abductions of local women. According to Herodotus, the Phoenicians initiated the abductions before the Greeks "landed at Tyre in Phoenice and carried off the king's daughter Europe" in retribution [1]. After using the name "Europe" to refer to the Greek world, Herodotus makes a further distinction by referring to Persia and Greece, respectively, as Asia and Europe. He states that it is the Persians who "claim Asia for their own, (...) Europe and the Greek race they hold to be separate from them", thereby implying the geographical demarcation to be rather a broad consensus embraced by both the Greeks and the Persians during the time [1]. However, only after king Cyrus conquered almost all Asian nations, Persia became an expansive territoriality empire, and the Asia-Europe duality came into more concrete form. Under such historical background, Herodotus wrote the *Histories* to study the culture of the Greeks and the barbarians, among which the Medes and the Persians are especially representative.

A significant political divergence between the East and the West is their interpretation of the power relationship, which, for the former, is embodied in the spatial separation between the people and the ruler. Deioces, for example, constructed seven circles of colored walls once established Median kingship [1]. The walls, known as Agbatana, were built with each outer circle higher than the inner

one [1]. This serves not only to fortify the city as reliable infrastructural power but also to portray the newly inaugurated king as a distanced figure who situates himself within the royal stronghold at the center of the city and allows no one to come into his presence [1]. The king who holds absolute power places himself on top of the hierarchical structure and claims his superiority with recourse to both his central position and his physical separation from the people that he governed, indicating the power relationship between the ruler and the excluded as that between master and slaves, with the latter paying regular homage to the mystified ruler. This bears a strong resemblance to the Babylonian palace and the Zeus Belus that Herodotus describes in book 1, both enclosed by strong walls to form a space invisible to the common people [1].

The spatial confinement is crucial to understanding the Eastern political ideology that stresses the invisibility of political power. Just as Pelling pointed out, Herodotus seeks to answer many questions in the *Histories*, which encompass not only topographical ones but also the political mechanism underlying each subject of interest [2]. Similar to Media and Babylonia, Persia also believes strongly in the correlation between spatial relations and political structure. It is stated that they endorse an ethnocentric belief and “deem themselves to be in all regards by far the best of all men” [1]. They tend to hold more respect towards regions geographically closer to Persia. The further the region is away from Persia, the more politically marginalized it is conceived of based upon the hierarchical structure, and the less respect it will, in turn, receive [1]. For the same reason, Persia became the only area exempt from taxes, while all the other satrapies were mandated to follow the tribute system that Darius put into practice [1]. However, a more paradigmatic example of the East would be the constitutional debate of the Persian empire described in book 3.

3. Persian Nomos and Politics in the Constitutional Debate

According to Herodotus, the debate takes place after the overthrow of the pseudo-Smerdis, and three Persian elites, Otanes, Megabyzus, and Darius, convene to discuss what form of government would be the most desirable for the empire. While many criticize the historicity of the debate for being replete with Atticisms, this event needs to be understood, as Giulia Sissa points out, neither as Herodotus’ voice of politics nor as an erroneous record but as “a momentous episode in a temporal perspective— before the acts and events that will follow” which allows the reader to consider, based on the text itself, the cultural diversity within the broader context of the war [3,4]. In this sense, the debate holds significance since it combines the two narratives, culture and politics, into a whole and helps the understanding of the Persian politics linked inextricably to its nomos, or the laws and customs. In the tripartite debate, the three conspirators respond to the question of political structure based on their understanding of the Eastern nomos.

The first speaker, Otanes, upholds nomos through the indictment of monarchy exemplified by Cambyse’s reign. Monarchy, as he asserts, breeds hubris and insatiability that makes the monarch turn “the laws of the land upside down” to slake his personal desires [1]. His view suggests the natural incompatibility between social conventions and the disposition of the ruler whose power goes far unbridled. Therefore, he opts for an immediate transition from absolute monarchy to isonomia, a democratic type of government that grants equal power to the Persian population. Otanes’s political view is rooted in the maintenance of nomos and the belief that the monarch would fail to live up to the societal and religious conventions since the individual is by nature insatiable, which would bring harm to the empire granted unlimited power.

While Otanes brings up the preservation of nomos in the negation of monarchy, the second speaker, Megabyzus, endorses aristocratic oligarchy and rebukes the proposition of isonomia by conforming to the Persian deference to rank and by arguing that the masses lack political expertise and can only “rush headlong and drive blindly onward, like a river in spate” [1,5]. His attitude resonates more with the Persian nomos compared to the democratic regime proposed by Otanes, whose reference to nomoi remains unspecific.

However, Darius ultimately wins the most votes, upholds monarchy, and denounces both isonomia and aristocratic oligarchy. However, he neither offers any solution to what Otanes points out to be the plights of monarchism nor proves monarchism to be the most impeccable form of government. It is primarily thanks to his reference to specific Persian nomoi along with the conventionalization of monarchism that his proposal prevails over the other two. He maintains that "...as the rule of one man gave us freedom, so that rule we should preserve; and (...) we should not repeal the good laws of our fathers; that was ill done." [1].

In short, there are two main points underlying Darius' approbation of monarchy: freedom and allegiance to ancestral customs. His view suggests that monarchy is the most reflective of the nomos of the Eastern empire and that the Persians are obligated to stick to the monarchical convention that Cyrus the Great established. Since it was king Cyrus who liberated the Persian nation and led the empire to prosperity, Darius urged the people to maintain the nomos that he formulated instead of supplanting it with, for instance, the democratic form of government that the first speaker Otanes proposed because not only does it violate the prescribed convention, Darius' emphasis on ancestral customs also implies that isonomia would fall into the unorthodox, since the Persians are more culturally inculcated with their hierarchical convention and the custom to defer to ranks [1]. Power, like the king, dwelled in an enclosure of walls and should be invisible to the general public according to the Eastern convention.

4. Greek Democracy and its Role in the Greco-Persian Wars

However, the Hellenic democracy, on the contrary, stresses individual autonomy that starkly opposes the invisibility of executive power that the Persian empire favors. The author privileges Athenian democracy as an advantage in a political form that allows the Greek coalition to overpower the Persian army first at Marathon and later in the decisive Battle of Salamis. He comments that Athens, when oppressed by tyranny, "willed to be cravens, as men working for a master, but when they were freed, each one was zealous to achieve for himself" [1].

While Darius interprets freedom as the liberation of the Persian nation from Median domination, he fails to grasp the aspect of individual freedom, which, as Herodotus points out, propels the Greek states to form the Panhellenic League to defend their autonomy against territorial impingement. This idea is encapsulated in the words of the Spartan exile Demaratus who claims that the courage of the Greek citizens is the result of both "wisdom and strong law" and that "by use of courage Hellas defends herself from poverty and tyranny... they will never accept (...) the enslaving of Hellas" [1]. Their military morale is promoted not only by the city-state's sovereignty but, more importantly, by their political duties as lawful citizens and their determination to preserve individual autonomy against the threat of foreign overlordship. For the Eastern empire, the word freedom is conceptualized solely as the liberation from foreign domination instead of true, internal freedom that strengthens the military capacity in the case of the Greek coalition who, as Immerwahr pointed out, "are fighters for freedom in a sense unknown to the East" [6].

In the Western political template, political power is much less coercive or invisible since it is equally designated to each citizen who participates in political affairs daily and is involved in making their own form of government. Similarly, in the Persians presented in 472 BCE, the Greek tragedian Aeschylus also ascribed their victory to the pursuit of liberty and wrote in a chorus, "The Persian law No more shall Asia's realms revere. To their lord's hand. At his command. No more the exacted tribute bear. Who now falls prostrate at the monarch's throne? His regal greatness is no more." portraying the Greeks as liberators who emancipated the Asiatic population from the shackle of Persian despotism [7].

However, like Darius' conceptualization of monarchy, Greek freedom undergoes a period of transformation. In the early 6th century, Solon the Athenian first polarised the concept of freedom and slavery when he wrote "...The mortgage-stones that covered her, by me Removed—the land that was a slave was free" [8]. Here, the notion of freedom is more related to the personal realm as the

person deprived of land is simultaneously stripped of freedom and becomes enslaved. Later during Pisistratus' reign, however, Solon extends the meaning of freedom from the personal to the public realm by condemning those who do not rise against tyranny as slaves [9]. The word "freedom", or "eleutheros", thus becomes intertwined with Athenian politics as it symbolizes the rule of the demos instead of tyranny. However, it is only until the Persian Wars that the value of freedom gained more public awareness, as attested to by sources such as Aeschylus's *Persians*, Pindar's *First Pythian Ode*, and the war epigrams that extol the maintenance of polis freedom [10]. In other words, the Persian invasions were conducive to the formation and gradual spread of the Hellenic conceptualization of freedom, which, as mentioned, denotes both polis independence and individual liberty to participate in political affairs.

5. Conclusion

Notwithstanding its vast resources, the Persian empire was still lost to the coalition of small Greek city-states that had just been through a democratization process. After setting the East-West dichotomy, Herodotus chalks up the result of the Greco-Persian Wars to the problem of political forms. Both nations espouse different regimes opposing each other based on different political cultures and distinct conceptualizations of freedom. For Darius, it is only accessible to the single monarch instead of the plural. The Persians opted for monarchy rather than isonomia due to their predilection to maintain ancestral customs and Eastern despotism, yet failed to acknowledge democracy as a source of power that prompted the sense of democratic patriotism integral to Greek victory. By examining the political and cultural diversity between East and West, Herodotus explains that the outcome of the Greco-Persian Wars centered fundamentally around the problem of political form, which also significantly contributed to the development of modern political thought.

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