

Q: What was the impact of democracy on Herodotus?

Herodotus lived a significant part of his life in a democratic Athens at the height of its power and prestige. Whether you date the advent of democracy to the late 6th century or the reforms of the 460s Herodotus would have seen this system of government fully up and running. The question here is how much of an impact did the democracy have? Forsdyke believes that the democracy had such an effect on Herodotus that his work can be used as a source for Athens' democratic ideology¹. Even if we accept such a suggestion it is clear that Herodotus' account of Athens and his work as a whole were multi-layered. Significant portions of his Athenian narrative appear based on the stories of aristocratic families. Athens is not spared occasionally explicit and often implicit criticism and pinning down Herodotus' own political stance is far from straightforward. By looking at these different elements I aim to examine to what extent he was impacted by democratic ideology.

Before looking at the sections of the *Histories* dealing specifically with Athens and the Athenians it is worthwhile to see if we can determine any overall political outlook in Herodotus. I will look at the possible incidences of democratic ideology expressed by non-Athenians shortly, as is recommended by Forsdyke, but first there is the question of Herodotus' attitude to tyrants². Since substantial sections of the *Histories* deal with Greek history in the sixth century BCE it is not surprising to find a number of tyrants and stories of tyranny. When discussing the concepts of late fifth-century Athens Raaflaub states that by showing the negative features of tyranny the positive aspects of democracy were brought out while the concept of freedom became "the solid monopoly of democracy"³. So a hostility to tyrants and a contrast of that regime to democracy could be a feature of a democratic ideology. It is believed that Herodotus had personal experience of tyranny, having been expelled from his native Halicarnassus before returning to see the tyrant overthrown⁴. For Wells this gives a personal explanation for what is sometimes said to be Herodotus' dislike of tyrants⁵. At the same time Wells can see that such a hatred was far from uniform as he believes Herodotus praised a previous tyrant of his city, Artemisia⁶.

Gammie suggests that Herodotus' images of kings and tyrants were "consistently drawn on the basis of a conventional norm"⁷. These norms consisted of a number of defects including hubris, envy, violence towards women and indiscriminate murder⁸. Positive aspects are not always excluded but a range of Greek and non-Greek tyrants and kings display similar characteristics. Ferrill argues that Herodotus was able to refer to this range of characters in specific ways with the terms *monarchos*, *basileus* and *tyrannos* not used interchangeably but with the last term used to highlight "arbitrary, despotic, and evil government"⁹. As the example of the tyrants of Halicarnassus mentioned above indicate Herodotus' treatment of tyrants was not simple. Gray argues that while motifs and story elements may be shared across examples there is no overall stereotypical depiction of the tyrant¹⁰.

One of the most important sections to draw on when looking for Herodotus' political views is the speech of Socles presented at 5.92. The importance of this speech is underlined by the fact it is one of the longest in the whole work¹¹. For Moles Socles' method of delivering a history of the tyrants of Corinth and his representation of tyranny are so close to Herodotus that "Socles isn't really Socles: he's Herodotus"¹². This speech delivered as the Spartans contemplate restoring the tyrant of Athens they recently removed is full of denunciations of tyranny. Socles states clearly "there is nothing

1 Forsdyke, 2001, p329

2 Forsdyke, 2001, p335

3 Raaflaub, 1983, p520-523

4 Wells, 1928, p319

5 Wells, 1928, p319

6 Wells, 1928, p318

7 Gammie, 1986, p195

8 Gammie, 1986, p174

9 Ferrill, 1978, p387-391

10 Gray, 1996

11 Moles, 2007, p246

12 Moles, 2007, p265

wickeder or bloodier in the world than tyranny”¹³. The different themes such as sexual excess, murder and exile are all presented in the story¹⁴. Herodotus does not hide that Cypselus' tyranny was foretold by oracle and so perhaps divinely ordained nor that despite the killings and the theft Cypselus ruled for thirty years and “died in the height of prosperity”¹⁵. Not all tyrants come to a bad end and their rule can even be successful. Moles argues that Herodotus is far from defending tyranny here but its potential success or advantages have to be taken into account first¹⁶. It would be going too far to say that this central and critical speech provides a balanced view of tyranny but the picture is certainly not without ambiguities.

The Thrasybulus' anecdote in the middle of Socles' speech is for Forsdyke an example of the influence of democratic ideology¹⁷. Forsdyke suggests that the story started off, and later reverted to, an aristocratic tradition representing the injustices carried out by tyrants against other aristocrats¹⁸. In Socles' speech Herodotus keeps the story the same but the impact of it is to make the tyrant start attacking the whole of the citizen body not just his fellow aristocrats. This, Forsdyke suggested, shows the altering of the anecdote to fit into democratic ideology by alluding to “the link between tyranny and the “wasting” of the civic body that was a dominant theme in [democratic] traditions”¹⁹. It has been pointed out that this and other elements of the speech would not be appropriate ways of telling a Sparta worried about Athens possible power not to act to weaken it now²⁰. This and the importance Herodotus attached to the speech suggest that this was a story that Herodotus wanted to tell, and it seems it was a story presented in a democratic manner.

Another significant speech occurs in book 3 with the so-called Persian Debate²¹. Herodotus emphasises the importance of these speeches by twice confirming against doubts that they did indeed happen²². Herodotus has Otanes advocate against the rule of one man, arguing that “Monarchy is neither pleasant nor good”²³. We can see the influence of later political ideas in this set of three speeches and perhaps it was even the anachronistic nature of the debate that meant Herodotus had to stress its reality. The debate between democracy, oligarchy and monarchy represents the “standard Greek scheme” of fifth century political theory²⁴. While the reference to Otanes' speech later on, at 6.43, connects it to democracy the main speech at 3.80 used terms and characteristics not necessarily exclusive to democracy²⁵. It could be that the important dichotomy is not between tyranny and democracy but that between tyranny and freedom. Wells sees Herodotus as more interested in freedom from the tyrant than in democracy²⁶. As Gammie points out Otanes does use many of the negative associations of monarchy and the tyrant which have been identified but the speech is concerned almost entirely with a denunciation of rule by one man rather than the merits of democracy²⁷. Furthermore this speech is not the only one in this scene, nor is it victorious²⁸. Rather than seeing here evidence for the influence of democratic ideology Waters believes that “the correct interpretation is that there is no ideological prejudice in Herodotus”²⁹. Dmitriev explains the potential gap in the terms by arguing that Herodotus was using sources from different periods but as the meaning of terms changed over time what may earlier have been associated with *isonomia* later came to mean *demokratia* which the speech is specifically linked to

13 Hdt.5.92.a

14 Moles, 2007, p256

15 Hdt.5.92.f

16 Moles, 2007, p261

17 Hdt.5.92.f-g; Forsdyke, 1999

18 Forsdyke, 1999, p365

19 Forsdyke, 1999, p368

20 Forsdyke, 1999, p367; Gray, 1996, p362

21 Hdt.3.80-82

22 Hdt.3.80;6.43

23 Hdt.3.80

24 Rhodes, 2018, p269

25 Dmitriev, 2015, p56-66

26 Wells, 1928, p324

27 Gammie, 1986, p174

28 Waters, 1972, p141

29 Waters, 1972, p141

later³⁰.

In the two sections considered so far, those of Socles and Otanes' speeches, we can see the impact of democracy. This influence though is not without ambiguities. A general anti-tyrant attitude does not exclude more positive treatment while Otanes' criticism of one man rule and advocacy of democracy does not, as it could not in this case, win. Based on Herodotus' overall political views, democracy was an influence but we can't yet tell who much of one.

Having established that there are signs of the influence of democratic ideology on Herodotus' *Histories* I can now look more closely at the account of Athens and its sources. A wide range of sources contributed to the account of Athens and the actions of the Athenians. Murray says that Athens forms a "surprising exception" in that there are signs of the presence of an aristocratic family tradition in the democratic city³¹. The extent of Herodotus' reliance on and use of family traditions is an important question in relation both to Athens and democracy, especially considering the fact that one of those families played a part in bringing about the democracy in the first place.

It is generally accepted that Herodotus made use of oral traditions in the *Histories*³². Aristocratic or prominent families would have been in a privileged position for getting their stories known and remembered so they would be a significant part of any community's history³³. Other sources of tradition existed and Forsdyke has argued for the existence of a democratic polis tradition³⁴. A number of aristocratic families played a prominent role in Herodotus' account of Athens and so his treatment of their role is important for assessing how much of an impact democracy had. It seems that Herodotus did not simply present a family tradition but instead used elements of it along with other sources and among these different sources it is possible to see the influence of the democracy.

The Alcmaeonidae are perhaps the most prominent of the Athenian families to appear in the *Histories*. They are introduced along with the tyranny of Pisistratus in book 1 before playing a part in the overthrow of that regime in book 5³⁵. Herodotus went on to give a defence of the family following the battle of Marathon in book 6. The treatment the Alcmaeonidae received across these different sections has been described as a "Balanced and critical appraisal, not adulation"³⁶.

One of the family's first historical actions is their discreditable role in suppressing Cylon's coup for which they were cursed³⁷. While mentioning the family's murder of the suppliants Herodotus' story at least spreads the family's guilt as it has a ruling body sharing in the crime³⁸. For Hart either Herodotus or the family tradition has added in this extra information so that a discreditable story is presented in the most favourable way. The same may be true for some elements of the story of Athens' liberation from tyranny. In Herodotus' account the Alcmaeonidae are responsible, via Delphi, for the Spartan aid which frees the city. The way Herodotus tells it the family were in Delphi because they had been driven into exile, which while true misses out the fact that they at times lived and served in Athens under the tyranny³⁹.

On occasion Herodotus may have given the family slightly more favourable coverage than possible but this is not the case with the overall picture. Herodotus does not hide the fact that the Alcmaeonidae got Spartan support by bribing the oracle, an act "the Athenians say" these men did⁴⁰. Though Herodotus himself simply reports the bribery without any condemnation Thomas believes the words "the Athenians say" indicate a non-family source for this story which could be "anti-Alcmaeonid gossip" and certainly not something the family would want as a prominent part of their public image⁴¹. This debatable act is the family's major contribution to the liberation the rest was

30 Dmitriev, 2015, p81

31 Murray, 1987, p102

32 Murray, 1987

33 Finley, 1965, p297

34 Forsdyke, 2002, p535

35 Hdt.1.59-64; 5.55-92; 6.115-131

36 Hart, 1993, p35

37 Hdt. 5.71

38 Hart, 1993, p19

39 Hdt. 5.62; Hart, 1993, p25

40 Hdt.5.63

41 Thomas, 1990, p248-250

carried out by the Spartans, “those Athenians who wished for freedom” and Harmodius and Aristogeiton⁴². The famous tyrant-slayers actually take up a considerable chunk of the account of the liberation leaving the Alcmaeonidae to share the limelight. However, Herodotus is quite clear that while he is willing to tell their story they did not themselves liberate Athens as their deed “did the Athenians no good, for the oppression they suffered during the four succeeding years was worse than before”⁴³. Athens' liberation then is presented from a number of sources with the role of Harmodius and Aristogeiton remembered without giving them credit for bringing down the regime while the Alcmaeonidae are prominent but using dubious methods.

When discussing a supposed signal to the Persians after Marathon Herodotus launches into a defence of the Alcmaeonidae⁴⁴. The idea that the family were behind the signal is to him “quite extraordinary” as they were “tyrant-haters”⁴⁵. In this defence Herodotus states that no one could “surpass the Alcmaeonidae in hatred of absolute government”⁴⁶. He then goes on to briefly re-state the family's role in bringing down the tyranny, their actions being more meaningful than Harmodius and Aristogeiton. The rest of the defence is then taken up with stories of the origin of the family's wealth and prestige. As a defence of the family's record this comes across as almost impassioned but distinctly odd. The incorrect line that the family were in exile and opposed to the tyranny throughout its existence is repeated adding to the impression of a favourable account but the rest of the defence uses less favourable information. The bribery of Delphi is again reported before the family's wealth is explained by way of the ridiculous image of Megacles walking out of the treasury overflowing with gold⁴⁷. The family's prestige originates from its marriage to a tyrant's family, a story in which the Alcmaeonid candidate won Agarista's hand by not throwing away his chance with poorly considered dancing⁴⁸.

As a defence the overall impression is less than convincing. The links of the family to other tyrants far from being concealed are centre-stage⁴⁹. The wedding story while a good story does not fit into a defence of the family and Megacles' actions and the Delphi story highlight the family's cunning or duplicity. For Thomas the curious composition of the defence comes about because Herodotus “balanced the Alcmaeonid defence against highly damaging information which he got from wider popular or polis tradition”⁵⁰. This section mirrors Herodotus overall coverage of the family. Their story is told, and perhaps in part told the way they themselves would want, but more influences and sources are included and these change the image we have of the Alcmaeonidae.

Another prominent family gets similar treatment. The Kimonids feature a number of times in Herodotus' account with Miltiades being one of the more important characters. The time spent on the family could be a sign of interest from Herodotus⁵¹. Samons suggests that a number of the elements in the coverage of the Kimonids were distorted or invented. They are credited with opposition to the tyranny in Athens, though in the same section they are clearly seen working their way back into favour with the regime⁵². What Samons finds “particularly dubious” about this account is the murder of Kimon⁵³. Little detail or backing is given to the story and its use would be in presenting the family as victims of tyranny. A more significant potential distortion comes earlier on with Miltiades arguing in favour of betraying the Persians during the Scythian expedition⁵⁴. Here Miltiades supports the idea of destroying the bridge in order to trap the Persian forces while his fellow tyrants argue against him. When persuading the other members of the meeting not to follow

42 Hdt.5.64

43 Hdt.5.55

44 Hdt.6.121-131

45 Hdt.6.121

46 Hdt.6.123

47 Hdt.6.125

48 Hdt.6.126-130

49 Moles, 2002, p41

50 Thomas, 1990, p282

51 Samons, 2017, p27

52 Hdt.6.103

53 Samons, 2017, p30

54 Hdt.4.137-138

Miltiades Histiaeus warns them that if they betray the Persians their cities will turn on the tyrants and become democracies⁵⁵. Miltiades, while a tyrant serving the Persians, is seen advocating a policy that will lead to liberation and democracy in a secret meeting a considerable distance away from other Athenian witnesses. Samons describes this story too as “the very paradigm of a tale invented to explain away an inconvenient fact”⁵⁶.

Some elements of the Kimonids' accounts may reflect stories the family wished to be told but as with the Alcmaeonidae less favourable material is given alongside. The family's connections to tyranny are not hidden. They were clearly seen to be holding power as tyrants themselves and as stated above they had their connections to the Pisistratids. Furthermore, after the victory at Marathon Miltiades is seen to lead an attack on Paros based on a pretext. Herodotus discloses that the real reason was due to a personal grudge on the part of Miltiades⁵⁷.

For both of the families used as examples here Herodotus presents a very mixed account. On the positive side they are named and their acts recorded and some details more favourable to them make it into Herodotus' version. However, less convenient information is not hidden away and the families were not simply able to tell their own story. Instead Herodotus added information from other sources. We can perhaps see the influence of democracy in the accounts of these families. In terms of his overall approach to the family traditions Thomas sees Herodotus using a variety of sources and doing so “with considerable independence of mind”⁵⁸. When discussing the Kimonids' coverage Samons states that by Herodotus' time the Athenians' view of the prior century would have become “grossly distorted” with democracy being one of the reasons for this distortion⁵⁹. The ideas mentioned above that the Alcmaeonidae were always tyrant-haters or that Miltiades plans on the Scythian campaign would have led to democracy could be examples of the families adapting to their new democratic surroundings.

The families re-positioning themselves as anti-tyrant or democrats is one aspect of the influence of democracy. Another would be the way in which the story of the liberation of Athens and the democratic revolution are told. Following the liberation an Alcmaeonid, Cleisthenes, is involved in the establishment of democracy but Herodotus' treatment of him has been described as “unenamoured”⁶⁰. Cleisthenes is introduced by being singled out as the one who bribed the oracle⁶¹. The details provided tell of how Cleisthenes was in competition with another member of the elite and carried out reforms inspired by his grandfather's actions. That grandfather was Cleisthenes the tyrant of Sicyon thus linking the founder of democracy with tyranny. As with the coverage of the family as a whole, the part they played is not denied but it seems to be being subverted.

The role of the Alcmaeonidae in the liberation of Athens is given by Herodotus but what is interesting is that in the revolutionary changes that followed in the city Cleisthenes shares his prominence not with an individual but with the Athenians as a whole. In the account of the beginnings of democracy Cleisthenes is in competition with Isagoras and so turns to the common people⁶². When describing the reforms that followed Herodotus chose to focus on the story of Cleisthenes' tyrant grandfather before telling us the reason why the family are cursed⁶³. Cleisthenes himself, along with a large number of aristocratic families are then removed from the scene leaving it up to the Athenians as a whole to rise up, defeat the Spartans and push back the subsequent invasions⁶⁴. Ober takes this account to be correct and plausibly defends the idea that the crucial moment in the revolution was a leaderless uprising of the Athenians⁶⁵. After Cleisthenes leaves the city it is the collective actions of the Athenians that is narrated, this could be both more or less

55 Hdt.4.137

56 Samons, 2017, p37

57 Hdt.6.132-133

58 Thomas, 1990, p280

59 Samons, 2017, p22-23

60 Moles, 2002, p38

61 Hdt.5.66

62 Hdt.5.66

63 Hdt.5.71

64 Hdt.5.72-77

65 Ober, 1999, p32-53

accurate and a reflection of democratic ideology which would tend to emphasis collective actions over individuals⁶⁶.

Forsdyke also finds other elements of this account that suggest a democratic tradition. This episode accords with Forsdyke's idea that Herodotus presents a version of Athenian history which shows the positive impact of democracy⁶⁷. Herodotus opens the story of the revolution with the line "Athens has been great before; now, her liberty won, she grew greater still."⁶⁸. It is worth noting that Herodotus seems to say Athens' greatness is not just because of liberty from the tyrant but comes from what happens subsequent to it. Herodotus is soon further praising the transformation as not long after, the Athenians' victory over a number of enemies is taken as proof of the positive effects of the removal of the tyranny⁶⁹. Being weak under a tyranny but strong under a democracy is a theme that Forsdyke believes appears in other Athenian works⁷⁰. Athens' positive transformation, a situation achieved through collective action, is a story that accords well with democracy.

There is then a clear impact of democracy on Herodotus' account of Athens. Democracy influenced his sources and perhaps changed the way the aristocratic families presented their stories. There are signs that when the Athenians told the story of their revolution they emphasised collective action and the positive transformation the change brought about. While we can say democracy influenced his sources it is less clear what influence it had on Herodotus himself. As seen above he often presented a mixed and balanced view of tyrants generally and the aristocratic families of Athens. Because he put different sources and traditions side by side we can not always know which if any Herodotus preferred. The remaining thing to consider here is Herodotus' view on Athens. He may have joined with the Athenians in highlighting the positive effects of their new democracy but there are indications that his view of the actions of democratic Athens were far from positive.

Herodotus offers a few instances of explicit praise and criticism for Athens. He ventures what he says will be a controversial opinion and states that it was Athens that held the balance in the war, and so it was they who saved Greece⁷¹. That he felt himself "compelled to express an opinion that I know most people will object to" seemingly emphasises a deeply felt and genuine view. Later on the Athenians make an impassioned speech declaring they will not abandon the campaign against Xerxes⁷². Compared with such high praise the moments of explicit criticism are minimal. Early in the *Histories* Herodotus expresses his surprise that the Athenians, supposedly the most intelligent of the apparently generally clever Greeks, fall for Pisistratus simple trick of dressing up a tall girl as Athena⁷³. A somewhat more significant attack is aimed at the democracy itself shortly after its creation. Herodotus criticises the Athenians for listening to Aristagoras flattery and schemes, which had failed to convince the Spartan king, concluding that it is "easier to impose upon a crowd than upon an individual"⁷⁴. Such a comment comes across as an attack on the democracy, suggesting that the crowd makes worse decisions than a king⁷⁵. This interpretation is most likely correct though it is interesting to note the possibility that the Athenians themselves were not incapable of voicing similar criticism. Ober states that similar attacks on flattery and the Athenians' tendency to fall for it is a line that was used by later orators without being anti-democratic⁷⁶.

The more serious potential criticisms come in more subtle forms. He is naturally not a character in the *Histories* but Pericles dominated the Athens of Herodotus' day and the moments that allude to him seem at best ambiguous. Pericles was connected to the Alcmaeonidae and so Herodotus contradictory defence of the family ends in a dream of his birth which sees Pericles' mother give

66 Forsdyke, 2002, p536

67 Forsdyke, 2002, p534

68 Hdt.5.66

69 Hdt.5.78

70 Forsdyke, 2001, p339-343

71 Hdt.7.139

72 Hdt.8.143

73 Hdt.1.60

74 Hdt.5.97

75 Waters, 1972, p136

76 Ober, 1989, p321-323

birth to a lion⁷⁷. Whether this was meant to be taken as a positive or negative image is unclear⁷⁸. In the speech of Socles' the birth of a lion is an ominous sign⁷⁹. This lion, the tyrant Cypselus, is "mighty, ravaging; and he will loose the knees of many"⁸⁰. Based on this example the birth of Pericles is a warning sign. The *Histories* ends with the actions of Pericles' father near the Hellespont. Xanthippus brutally puts to death the Persian governor of the area after he has been captured⁸¹. Artayctes is crucified for a number of crimes committed in the area and Irwin's reading of this suggests that both the crimes and the punishment allude to alleged scandals of Pericles⁸². Making this worse is that the scene comes not long after the Spartans are seen to have turned down calls for brutal retribution⁸³. I would agree with Moles when he states "The *Histories* ends ominously with Athens, tyrant-city, on the threshold of her unjust and tyrannical empire."⁸⁴.

This type of scene with its implied criticism of the Athenian Empire and its leading figure is similar to other subtle warnings about Athens' behaviour beyond the scope of the *Histories*. Above I described how the Socles' speech has been taken as a key section for discovering Herodotus' attitudes to tyranny and the impact of democracy. The speech by a Corinthian arguing against a Spartan intervention in Athens is ironic given the events that would lead up to the Peloponnesian War⁸⁵. Immediately after the speech Hippas makes this clear when he swears "the day will come when Corinth would find herself plagued by the Athenians"⁸⁶. This speech denouncing tyranny can not help but draw to mind Athens and in the words of Grethlein "it evokes Athenian imperialism in the fashion of an oracle."⁸⁷.

These various references to Athenian actions in the future for the *Histories* but contemporary to Herodotus make it almost certain that his work was not a celebration of Athens⁸⁸. The attitude to Athens is perhaps best summed up by Moles when he states "Herodotus admires Athens *qua* saviour of Greece but condemns the empire."⁸⁹. Democracy's influence on Herodotus did not extend to a blind admiration of its mother city.

Democracy clearly impacted Herodotus' *Histories* and his sources. Traces of its language, ideology and images do appear and the aristocratic families of Athens likely wanted to tell stories that fitted them neatly into the new reality. Democracy's influence on Herodotus himself is more ambiguous and what comes across from the different aspects I have considered here is that Herodotus can not be pinned down to one position. He is hostile to tyrants and monarchy while allowing for some positive aspects. He pays attention to Athens aristocratic families and defends them on some points but does not conceal the inconsistency of some aspects of their past. Athens itself can be praised for becoming great during the democracy and saving Greece even if its later actions come in for criticism. Democracy was one influence on Herodotus and aspects of its ideology can be found in his work but it remained one influence among others.

77 Hdt.6.131

78 Thomas, 1990, p270-271

79 Hdt.5.92.b

80 Hdt.5.92.b

81 Hdt.9.114-121

82 Irwin, 2018, p286-300

83 Irwin, 2018, p283-285

84 Moles, 2007, p264

85 Moles, 2007, p262

86 Hdt.5.93

87 Grethlein, 2018, p231

88 Wells, 1928, p325; Waters, 1972, p149

89 Moles, 2002, p51

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