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Review of "Herodotus and the Question Why," written by Christopher Pelling

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Christopher Pelling, (2019) *Herodotus and the Question Why*. Austin: University of Texas Press. xv + 360 pp. \$55.00. ISBN 9781477318324 (hbk).

‘Does Herodotus think democracy a good thing?’ Christopher Pelling asks toward the end of his erudite and wide-ranging *Herodotus and the Question Why*. ‘The answer surely will be “yes and no”’ (p. 234). Freedom and democracy often lead to disturbing consequences as well as inspiring ones; Herodotus praises nothing without also revealing, sometimes subtly, its potential downsides. Strengths and weaknesses go closely together, both building and then imperiling greatness. Herodotus’ ability to hold these opposing interpretations together is not, Pelling asserts, an incoherence of thought. It is just a paradox.

Summoning many decades of inquiries into Herodotus (and citing 35 of his own articles, chapters, and books on the subject), Pelling centers the work of explanation in his study of Herodotus. Explanation appears as one of the motivations for the *Histories* themselves, which Herodotus describes (in Pelling’s translation) as ‘why they [sc. the Greeks and the barbarians] came to war with one another’ (p. 22). Explanation hopes to ‘make something more understandable’ (p. 5) and Pelling untangles the many skeins of explanation that Herodotus offers in the early books of the *Histories*: *aiti-* words that focus on blameworthiness or charges of malfeasance; *prophasis*, which Herodotus uses like Thucydides to describe an explanatory account put forward by an interested party; and *proschêma*, which describes a pretext or rationalization—not the true cause but a supposed one. Herodotus also employs stories for the sake of explanation, letting audiences draw their own inferences from recurrent patterns or suggestive narratives. Explanation, Pelling observes, ‘is a game for two’: explanatory success depends on an audience’s uptake. Herodotus’

preferred modes of explanation say a lot about who he took his audience to be and his variety of explanatory strategies suggests the different forms of persuasion current in his day.

But explanation comes with closure, and Herodotus' *Histories* seem to resist closure at every turn. *Herodotus and the Question Why* expands the very idea of explanation early in its argument, opening it like a folded envelope to reveal the letter within. Herodotus does not just explain; he shows his readers how you could possibly know anything. He shows his own 'rethinking in stride' (p. 93)—one wonderful formulation among many in this volume—reworking patterns and complicating seemingly simple explanations as he goes. Pelling sees an affinity here with the Hippocratics, who developed 'corroborative argument' (p. 88) as well as such revisions, either finding support for initial hypotheses or revising their hypotheses when they discovered contrary evidence. Herodotus, for example, begins his description of the Egyptians by asserting that their way of life inverts that of the Greeks. 'When the topsy-turvy idea returns', Pelling writes, Herodotus has revised the 'attention-grabbing initial strong proposition' (p. 90), writing that the Egyptians 'avoid using Greek customs and, so to speak, those of any other peoples' (2.91), a phrase that leaves the possibility of similarities open.

As the narrative of the *Histories* unfurls, the predictability that explanations would seem to promise—e.g. that x phenomenon will lead to y consequence—becomes less clear cut. *Aitia* begins to appear ambiguous. Herodotus' language of wonders (*thômata*) reflects his increasing awareness of unpredictable and inexplicable phenomena in the world he encounters. Modern historians worry about overdetermined events—what social scientists call 'endogeneity problems'—but the language of wonder often evokes the opposite: underdetermined phenomena that seem enormously important yet stun and bemuse the inquirer. Wonders are things and events that resist explanation.

When Pelling turns to the actual sequence of events of the *Histories*—which he loosely follows in the latter two-thirds of the book—these framing thoughts on explanation allow for an expansive expatiation of Herodotus’ stories. While many interpretations leap on the pattern of expansionism and self-destruction that begins in Book I and shapes the narrative of the Persians’ invasions in the books that follow, Pelling sounds the many dissonant notes to this over-simple account. For one, the Greeks do a lot to bring the war with the Persians on themselves—meddling at the court, caring more about their own petty factionalism, and being sucked into aggressive behavior, such as when the Athenians are persuaded by Aristagoras to join the Ionian revolt from Persian control (5.97). More broadly, claims about blame and vengeance are ‘displaced from their natural place and placed in mouths where they ring false’ (p. 127). The stories of the Persians raise questions about how much they really differ from their Greek enemies. These stories are redolent with an ‘un-Greek’ atmosphere, yet while Cambyses behaves with ‘brutal insensitivity’, when Darius later asks Indians and Greeks about how they would treat the bodies of their dead fathers, the Greeks’ horror at the Indians’ response—that they would eat them—resembles Cambyses’ prejudicial judgment, while Darius exemplifies open-minded understanding.

Pelling’s own sensitivity to nuance and paradox in the *Histories* culminates in his approach to the treatment of the Greeks’ victory and especially the tendency among many readers of Herodotus to explain the triumph as one of Greek values—embodied by democracy or freedom or ‘civilization’—over Persian ones. Pelling grants that this story has some basis in Herodotus—Herodotus comments that *isêgoria* in Athens prompted her rise to greatness (5.78), and the Spartan Demaratus explains that it is the *nomos* of freedom that empowers the Greeks to fight (7.104). There are reasons to believe the Greeks’ triumph was of their own making. Pelling impersonates

these moments of Greek pride when he asks: ‘Aren’t we simply *better* than them, and isn’t that explanation enough?’ (p. 167)

Such a rhetorical question may have satisfied many of Herodotus’ early auditors, but it did not stop Herodotus from further inquiry. For one, Herodotus’ sense of contingency qualifies any explanation: ‘Time and again, it could easily have been different’, Pelling observes (p. 167). Even with this qualification, no single explanatory variable—such as the Greeks’ being ‘better’—can suffice. In a rather un-Herodotean systematic survey, Pelling lays out the inadequacy of any simple explanation for the Greek victory: neither the gods nor ‘Greek values’ nor Greek strategies and tactics nor freedom nor democracy provides sufficient explanation. Unlike Thucydides, Herodotus does not appear interested in adducing a single set of causes. Peeling back the layers of Herodotus’ explanations, one never reaches the pith.

Yet each layer of explanation is distinct from the others. In this way, Herodotus is helpful for resisting the modern tendency toward conflating democracy and freedom. On his account, the Persians are free, but so are the Spartans, the Scythians, and the Athenians. Yet among these, only the Athenians have a democracy—and their democracy does not exist for the entirety of the *Histories*. Freedom may provide the rallying cry for the allied Greeks against the Persian invasion, but Herodotus has already staged a similar moment when Cyrus rallies the Persians against the Lydians on the grounds of freedom. Democracy is not necessary for freedom.

Nor is democracy sufficient for freedom. Democracy does play a powerful role at certain moments of the *Histories*, but its influence can also lead to ambivalent consequences. Pelling points out how democratic slogans in Ionia prompted revolts that then laid the groundwork for new forms of tyranny. The equal speaking for which democracy became notorious could get out of hand. Pelling describes how the Greek debate before the Battle of Salamis was a mess, a ‘great

pushing and shoving of words' during which Herodotus shows, on Pelling's reading, that 'the Greeks are wasting their bellicosity' with endless vociferation (p. 184).

Demokratia, for which Herodotus is the earliest source, was not yet a laudatory word in the late 5th century when Herodotus was composing his inquiries. Herodotus often employs periphrastics such as the series of *iso*- related words—*isonomia*, *isokratia*, and *isêgoria*—that surface from the mouths of quite unlikely sources (like Otanes, the Persian nobleman) as well as quite undemocratic regimes (like the Spartans and the Corinthians). Pelling notes that *isonomia* is 'never used pejoratively', perhaps suggesting Herodotus' affinities with the tyrant-slayers Aristogeiton and Harmodius who 'made Athens *isonomoi*' (p. 194). Yet while democracy 'glistens' for modern readers (p. 195), Herodotus does not shirk from casting shade.

Pelling casts doubt on a reading of Herodotus that celebrates the triumph of the people (*dêmos*). More often than he speaks of the *dêmos*, Herodotus describes groups of people—the Athenians, the Spartans, and the Persians. Yet even more often than this, Herodotus focuses his narrative on what Pelling calls the 'big man antagonisms', the vying of leaders of these groups of people. 'It is as a tool' of such antagonisms, Pelling asserts, 'that the *dêmos* comes into play with Cleisthenes' (p. 196). Cleisthenes' engagement with Isagoras led him to 'recruit the *dêmos* to his faction' (translating Herodotus 5.66.2). The Spartans later complain of the 'ungrateful demos' (5.91) that threw off their protection, but as Pelling points out, the subsequent debate concerns not democracy but the broader conflict between tyranny and freedom.

Democracy, according to Pelling, 'allows for a prism for seeing freedom pushed to the limit', functioning as an inverse image of tyranny as a prism for seeing people 'at the mercy of unrestrained power' (p. 197). Here I wonder if Pelling too quickly assimilates the democracy of the Athenians with democracy in general and loses Herodotus' appreciation for the wide variety

of ways in which the people can create and lose power. Take, for example, the episode when Cyrus leads the Persians to revolt against Astyages. Pelling mentions the passage where Herodotus describes how ‘they’—the Persians—‘cast off the yoke of slavery and became free men’ (1.95), but he places this in the larger context of ‘big man’ accomplishments. I would instead interpret Herodotus here as anticipating his description of the strength of the Athenians, whose liberation was also a collective act (5.78). When Cyrus later calls on the Persians to free themselves from slavery, Herodotus relates how ‘they enthusiastically went about gaining their independence’ (1.128). Yes, Darius’ father Hystaspes describes Cyrus as having made the Persians free, but this does not come in the narrator’s own voice. So too with Darius’ later argument that disavows the importance of the *dêmos* for freeing the Persians. When Herodotus describes the event independent of a particular character, it has much more of a popular flavor. The Persians themselves act as rulers; they affirm their power to create their freedom.

Athenian democracy may not be as ‘special’ (p. 207) for Herodotus as 21st century readers, myself included, tend to make it, but Pelling’s insistence on this point risks glossing the nuances among different formations of collective power that appear across the *Histories*. *Dêmokratia*, as Pelling points out, does not receive systematic treatment by Herodotus. Tyranny and freedom, however, do. I would suggest that Herodotus’ attention to how different peoples create, sustain, and fail to maintain collective power through *nomoi* illuminates an underlying counterpoint to the ‘big man’ narratives he also loves to tell. Winning freedom may depend on a leader, but its sustenance requires that the collective wean itself from such dependence. Themistocles gives good advice about how the ‘wall of wood’ refers to a fleet ready for battle at sea, but the Athenians decide to follow this advice. The collectivity holds the power and they are, after all, the ones who win the battle itself.

That said, the paradox to which Pelling returns readers of the *Histories* remains: Herodotus proposes no definitive set of *nomoi*—culture, customs, or laws—that can guarantee the perdurance of freedom won by collective power. So ‘yes and no’ to democracy but also ‘yes and no’ to Spartan *isokratia* or Ionian *isonomia*. And ‘yes and no’ to each of the *politeiai* that Herodotus introduces across the course of his inquiry. As Pelling demonstrates, Herodotus brings readers to appreciate this paradox through his wonderful summoning of myriad causes, explanations, stories, and human and nonhuman actors. By doing so, Herodotus equips us to understand and appreciate the dynamic nature of things, illuminating the reasons for both ‘yes’ and ‘no’. *Herodotus and the Question Why* opens such a reading of Herodotus with skill and intelligence. About the book, then, one can declare with confidence a resounding ‘yes’.

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