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# FOOTNOTES

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## TEACHING THE CLASSICS: WHAT AMERICANS CAN LEARN FROM HERODOTUS

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There is one obvious reason why Americans ought to find it useful to read and study Herodotus. He described a world that is in certain crucial regards like our own. Athens and Sparta were, of course, tiny communities. Herodotus tells us that at the time of the Persian Wars there were 30,000 adult, male Athenian citizens and 8,000 adult, male Spartan citizens. The difference in scale between these polities and our own is obvious and significant. But there is this that is similar. Athens and Sparta were republics. Matters of state were open to public debate; most major decisions were reached by voting; the citizens of both polities enjoyed the rule of law—and theirs were citizen armies.

These similarities are by no means accidental. The modern nation-state owes a great deal to the ancient example. In the medieval period, antiquity never entirely lost its purchase. Cicero's *De officiis* survived through the Dark Ages within the Christian West and was at all times widely read. In some measure, Roman law survived as well, and certain of its elements were imported into canon law, the only universal law in the Christian West. From canon law these made their way into the various common law systems

regnant locally within that otherwise exceedingly diverse world. One principle, derived from Roman law, deserves special attention.

Roman liberty was arguably derivative from ancient Greek liberty: the republicanism that emerged in Rome ca. 509 BCE, the species of self-government that was instituted there, was an Etruscan variation on practices developed earlier in Crete, at Sparta, and elsewhere in the Hellenic world. Naturally enough, the Romans carried over into private life the practices of public life, and, in keeping with this trend, Roman corporate law, as applied to the management of waterways, was built on the following principle: *Quod omnes tangit ab omnibus tractari debeat*—"that which touches all should be dealt with by all." This principle, borrowed by the Roman Catholic Church to make sense of the practice of electing abbots, bishops, and popes, provided an underpinning for the practice of self-government within guilds and cities and inspired the establishment of representative institutions within kingdoms. In part as a consequence of its propagation by the church, political liberty was no stranger in late medieval Europe, and this distinguished the Christian West from the Christian East and from the Muslim world as well.

### MASSED INFANTRY

The republicanism that first emerged in ancient Greece and spread to Etruria and Rome was built on certain military practices. Liberty was coeval with the preeminence of massed infantry. At some point between 700 and 650 BCE, someone in Greece invented a new kind of shield, which was commonly called a *hoplon*. This shield was designed to yoke together a line of men, and those who bore it were sometimes called *zeugitai*, "men yoked like oxen." It provided limited protection to the bearer, but contributed greatly to the protection of the man to his right; and, because horses will not plunge into a wall of shields, a phalanx of *hoplon*-bearers could face down cavalry. In effect, this military revolution meant that a sizable army of smallholders, wealthy enough to provide themselves with a spear, a sword, and the *hoplon*, could easily defeat an aristocratic force on horseback. This revolution, which rendered the old military aristocracy redundant, eventuated in its overthrow and the

establishment of populist tyrannies in many Greek cities. In time, as tyrants or their offspring abused the power that they had seized, it gave rise to government by the army assembly.

#### INFANTRY'S RENAISSANCE

The great revival of classical learning in the West that followed the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1453 coincided with a rediscovery within western Christendom of the capacity of disciplined infantry to defeat cavalry. In the second half of the fifteenth century, on two different occasions, the impoverished pikemen of the Swiss cantons defeated the mounted knights fielded by Charles the Bold of Burgundy, and from this time onward Swiss mercenaries were much in demand. The French hired them; so did the Spaniards; they were employed by the various cities and principalities of Italy; and to this day they guard the Vatican. Where they were not hired, their formations were imitated, and war underwent the revolution detailed in Machiavelli's *Art of War*. In the aftermath, Roman military tactics were studied all over Europe in detail, Roman drill was adopted, and Europe was set on the path that led to the French Revolution and to national armies drawn from among peasants not unlike the farmers who had served as soldiers in ancient Greece and Rome. The feudal levy declined in significance; dynastic loyalties slowly withered away; and national loyalties grew. The logic of developments pointed towards populism and ultimately towards self-government; the old institutions originally inspired by the Roman principle "that which touches all should be dealt with by all" came to enjoy a new life; and works such as *The Histories* of Herodotus became astonishingly popular. To understand the world then emergent, educated men and women turned back to classical antiquity.

#### IN DEFENSE OF LIBERTY

What happened in the span stretching from 1469 to 1789 and beyond was obviously a lot messier than can be indicated here. There were tyrants along the way: Oliver Cromwell, Napoleon Bonaparte, and Adolf Hitler are as important to this story as were Pheidon of Argos, Cypselus of Corinth, Thrasylbulus of Miletus, and Peisistratus of Athens to developments in the Greece described by Herodotus. But the unfolding logic pointed beyond populist tyrannies, and by the 17th and 18th centuries, many in Europe, as well as in the English colonies in North America, found that in reading Herodotus they were reading about men rather like themselves.

In 18th and 19th-century Britain and in 20th-century America, this seemed especially true. When the British fought Louis XIV in the War of the League of Augsburg and in the War of the Spanish Succession, when they battled Napoleon in the later years of the French Revolution, when the Americans took on Kaiser Wilhelm II and Adolf Hitler in World War I and World War II, and when they squared off against Joseph Stalin and his successors in the Cold War, they tended to find Herodotus' epic tale of the struggle of the Hellenes against Xerxes, the Great King of Persia, inspiring and instructive. When they read Herodotus, they were struck by his representation of the Greek resistance against the Persians as a struggle of

liberty against despotism. It was easy for scholars and journalists to reclothe the Persians, the Athenians, and the Spartans in modern garb, and much of the secondary literature in the field reflects a certain propensity for distortion.

#### ON THE EVE OF THERMOPYLAE

But, if truth be told, there were good grounds for the comparisons, and they are still pertinent. Ancient Greek history is a near ideal template for the analysis of American military history. Consider Herodotus. Not long before of the battle of Thermopylae, he tells us, Xerxes, the Great King of Persia, paused at Doriscus in Thrace to review his forces; and in this context, Herodotus, who modeled his *Histories* to a considerable degree on Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, provides us with a description of Xerxes' army intended as an analogue to the famous *Catalogue of Ships* in Homer's *Iliad*. After conducting this grand review, Xerxes summoned to his side an exiled Spartan king named Demaratus, and to the latter he posed a question--whether the Greeks would stand their ground against his great army and fleet. When Demaratus answered that Spartans would fight for liberty even if all the other Greeks supported the Persians, Xerxes expressed astonishment, given the disparity in numbers and in political institutions. "If," he said,

they were commanded by one, as our men are, for fear of him and reaching beyond the courage that is natural to them, they might go forward, though few against many, under compulsion of the lash. But being suffered to be free, they would do neither of these things. I myself believe that even if they were equal in numbers, the Greeks would find it hard to fight against Persians alone. The quality you speak of resides in us and in no others, and, even with us, in few, not many. There are those of my Persian bodyguard who would each fight three Greeks at once.

To this Demaratus had a ready response. As an exile, he had no reason to love the Spartans, but he owed the truth to his Persian benefactor. If need be, he testified, he would be happy to take on a member of Xerxes' bodyguard. Then, he observed:

"So it is with the Spartans: Fighting singly, they are as good as any, but fighting together they are the best soldiers in the world. They are free--yes--but not entirely free; for they have a master, and that master is *Nomos* (custom or law), which they fear much more than your subjects fear you. Whatever this master commands, they do; and his command never varies: it is never to retreat in battle, however great the odds, but always to stand firm, and to conquer or die."

Demaratus' added, "If, my lord, you think that what I have said is nonsense--very well; I am willing henceforth to hold my tongue. This time I spoke because you forced me to speak. In any case, I pray that all may turn out as you desire."

But, of course, it did not all turn out as Xerxes desired. In the narrows at Thermopylae, not long thereafter, Leonidas and his royal bodyguard of 300 held off the entire Persian army for three days, succumbing only when a local Greek betrayed to the Persians a path over the mountain, and Xerxes sent a contingent of his own bodyguard, the Ten Thousand Immortals, around behind the Spartans in the narrows. Moreover, not long thereafter, the Greek fleet defeated the much larger Persian fleet at Salamis; and a year later the army of the Hellenes defeated the remnants of Xerxes' army at Plataea. We are not in a position to confirm the truth of Herodotus' tale concerning the admonition issued by Demaratus, and it is perfectly conceivable that he made it up. But if it is not true, it should be, for it is certainly apt.

### NOMOS AND PHUSIS

On Herodotus, more can be said. The work that he called his *Historiai*--his *Inquiries* or *Histories*--consists of nine books. The last five tell the story of the Persian Wars, specifying their immediate origin and describing the conduct of war by both the Persians and the Greeks. These books tell a stirring tale; they form the first extended prose narrative ever composed and establish the character of the genre. Herodotus' battle descriptions are, in fact, the model on which all subsequent battle descriptions are based. But it is also the case that the last five books should be read in light of the first four, which are quite different in character.

Herodotus begins his *Histories* with a statement of his aim, which is to record "what man has brought into being" and the "great and wonderful deeds, manifested by both Greeks and barbarians," and also to explain "the reason why" the Greeks and the barbarians "fought one another." He will, he says, mark out the man who "began unjust acts against the Greeks," and he soon turns his attention first to Croesus, the ruler of Lydia who first conquered the Greek cities on the Asia Minor coast, and then to his forebears: above all else, to Gyges, the first in his family to achieve rule.

Herodotus uses the story of Gyges to clarify the nature of his own endeavor. Gyges was the bodyguard of the Lydian king Candaules, who thought his wife to be the most beautiful of women. To prove this to Gyges, he asked his bodyguard to secret himself in her room and observe her when she undressed. Gyges demurred, calling the suggestion "sick" and "unlawful." "Many are the fine things discovered by men of old, and among them is this one: *that each should look solely upon that which is his own*," he said. Candaules nonetheless insisted, and Gyges finally acquiesced. But the queen caught on and offered Gyges two alternatives: he could kill her husband, taking his wife and his kingship and ruling the Lydians, or die. One can guess which option he took.

The importance of the story is this. Over the course of the first four books of his *Inquiries*, Herodotus will ask his readers to do that which his Gyges singles out as unlawful. He will ask them *to look on that which is not their own*. He will describe in detail the history of the Lydians, the Egyptians, the Babylonians, the Scythians, the Medes, and the Persians, and he will outline their *nomoi*--their

customs, their laws, and their ways. Moreover, in a memorable passage in the third book, he will tell a story about Darius, the father of Xerxes, who, when Great King,

called together some of the Greeks who were in attendance on him and asked them what it would take to get them to eat their dead fathers. They said that they would not do it for all the money in the world. After this Darius summoned those of the Indians who are called Callatians, who *do* eat their parents, and in the presence of the Greeks (who understood the conversation through an interpreter), asked them what price would make them burn their dead fathers with fire. They shouted aloud "Don't mention such horrors!"

"These are matters of *nomos*," Herodotus concludes, "and I think [the poet] Pindar is right when he says, '*Nomos* is king of all.'"

"Everyone, without exception," claims Herodotus, "believes his own native *nomoi*, and the religion he was brought up in, to be the best." Everywhere it is contrary to *nomos* to look with favor on that which is not one's own. Everywhere it is a matter of *nomos* that one observe one's own *nomoi* and those alone. This is arguably the only universal *nomos*, and it is this *nomos* that Herodotus invites his readers to breach. He invites them to do what Gyges had done: he invites them to transgress--not, to be sure, with their eyes, but with the eye of the mind, and he does so for a reason. He explores the *nomoi* of the Egyptians, the Babylonians, the Scythians, the Medes, and the Persians for the purpose of ascertaining which of these is superior, and in the process he invites his readers, who are, of course, Greek, to reflect critically on the *nomoi* that are their own. Before taking his readers through his narrative of the origins and outcome of the Persian Wars, he asks them to think about the different, diverse peoples in the world, and he invites them to judge.

In this sense, Herodotus' book is a highly theoretical work--a work of cultural as well as political and military history, and, in fact, a work of philosophy as well--for if there is a standard by which the *nomoi* of the various peoples can be judged, it has to be what the Greeks called *phusis*. It has to be nature--and Herodotus invites those of us who read him today to engage in the same sort of cultural critique. He asks us, as he asked his fellow Greeks, to do something even more transgressive than what Gyges did and to attempt to ascertain what man as man is like when stripped of all that is conventional. Above all, he asks us to consider which conventions, which *nomoi* are the best; whether man really is by nature a political animal; and whether political liberty and the rule of law are not, in fact, the distinguishing marks of those human beings who most deserve admiration and emulation on our part.

### LIBERTY AND HUMAN EXCELLENCE

Herodotus' questions are still worth asking. They are, in particular, questions that Americans must pose to themselves. Is our heritage of political liberty and the rule of law a treasure worth fighting for? Does this heritage produce today, as Herodotus claims it arguably did in

antiquity, a people brave and resolute in their defense? Do the words that Demaratus used in describing the ancient Spartans describe modern Americans as well? When Francis Scott Key, in *The Star-Spangled Banner*, spoke of America as “the land of the free and the home of the

brave,” he was borrowing language that had been used to describe classical Sparta. If the comparison is no longer apt, Herodotus would tell us that it is unlikely we will remain for long a people free.

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