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Helmut Loeffler¹

Lessons in Leadership: Herodotus 1.125-126

Lecciones de liderazgo: Heródoto 1.125-126

Abstract:

The article offers a critique of the polarity paradigm that shaped studies on Herodotus by arguing that Herodotus' praise of Cyrus' leadership qualities served to his defense of the necessity of a capable Greek leader in the wake of the Peloponnesian War. As part of this argument the article also analyzes Herodotus' use of a short-story to emphasize aspects of his main narrative.

Keywords:

Herodotus; Cyrus; Greece; Persia.

Resumen:

El artículo ofrece una crítica del paradigma de la polaridad que dio forma a los estudios sobre Heródoto al argumentar que el elogio de Heródoto a las cualidades de liderazgo de Ciro sirvió para su defensa de la necesidad de un líder griego capaz a raíz de la Guerra del Peloponeso. Como parte de este argumento, el artículo también analiza el uso que hace Heródoto de un cuento para enfatizar aspectos de su narrativa principal.

Palabras clave:

Heródoto; Ciro; Grecia; Persia.

¹ Associate Professor. City University New York-Queensborough CC. hloeffler@qcc.cuny.edu

The perceived notion of an opposition between East and West permeated scholarship in the Humanities for hundreds of years.² Generally, it was proclaimed that Western Civilization dominates or is somehow of higher value than Eastern Civilization.³ One could argue that Herodotus, with his *Histories*, set the stage for this development. In his description of the war between Persians and Greek city-states Herodotus was seen as emphasizing how Eastern monarchs⁴ abused power while Greek city-states, especially Athens, fought to defend their freedom. The surprising outcome of the Persian Wars, with the Greeks being able to withstand the Persian war effort, usually is interpreted as the beginning and sign of Western superiority, the victory of freedom over slavery.⁵

However, Herodotus' work offers much more than this biased angle of interpretation. His work frequently offers a critique that targets contemporary politics in Greek city-states and praise for Eastern kings; he, for example, uses Persian rulers and their behavior to implicitly offer this criticism.⁶ Herodotus does not seem to particularly emphasize Western, i.e., Greek superiority but instead he inquires which custom, law, or other achievement of peoples stands out and is of interest. In this paper I analyze one particular passage of the *Histories* to discuss the use of a Persian (Eastern) "role-model."

Herodotus frequently uses short stories when he presents the results of his inquiries and his criticisms.⁷ These short stories are, at first glance, a digression from the main narrative. For the modern reader these anecdotes or novellas in the *Histories* are difficult to categorize. They often cannot be verified as historical. Our standards for determining what is true are based on a set research-process of verification. This

² See for example Kopf (1986: 23): "Most discussions on the origin of the East and West dichotomy have begun with Herodotus."

³ For a summary of the virtues that were perceived as uniquely Greek see Parkinson (1965: esp. 57-68).

⁴ Especially Xerxes. See for example 7.35: Xerxes has the Hellespont whipped and ankle-chains thrown into the water because a storm had destroyed the pontoon bridges. Xerxes also had the engineers decapitated.

⁵ See Ostwald (1991: 142): "... for Herodotus the issue in the Persian Wars was the affirmation of freedom against the threat of slavery."

⁶ See Forsdyke (2006: 229-232) who argues that Herodotus uses the description of foreign cultures as a tool to help his audience understand their own contemporary political and social environment; she emphasizes the Persian arrogance as described by Herodotus as referring to Athenian expansion and the dangers related to it when compared to Persia.

⁷ Gray (2002: 291ff) extensively discusses the problems of definition related to the term 'short story' in Herodotus.

verification-process is already acknowledged by Herodotus;⁸ nevertheless he includes sometimes stories that he, by his own admission,⁹ could not have verified based on his own research criteria.¹⁰ Herodotus declares that these stories were told to him and that he reports them as such.¹¹ He implies that they cannot be independently confirmed. As such, it is possible to deem them mythical.¹²

Shifts in scholarship have affected the way we treat these stories in Herodotus; these shifts ranged from dismissing them as mere *fabulae* to encasing them as an integral part of his work. The latter seems to be the common opinion today.¹³ The important questions that need to be asked, then, are: Why did Herodotus include these stories at the precise point in his narrative? What purpose do they serve? The simple answer is: They are part of and contribute in some form to his inquiries. However, it is more difficult to figure out in what way and how these stories add to the main narrative. In this paper I offer an interpretation of Herodotus' account of how Cyrus became leader of the Persians. I hope I may provide a way to understand an anecdote or myth and its contribution to the *Histories*.¹⁴

⁸ For example 2.99.1: Μέχρι μὲν τούτου ὄψις τε ἐμὴ καὶ γνώμη καὶ ἱστορίη ταῦτα λέγουσά ἐστι, τὸ δὲ ἀπὸ τούδε Αἰγυπτίους ἔρχομαι λόγους ἐρέων κατὰ τὰ ἤκουον· προσέσται δέ τι αὐτοῖσι καὶ τῆς ἐμῆς ὄψιος. “What I have said up to this point is based on what I myself saw and my judgement and inquiry. From here on I am going to report Egyptian records according to what I have heard; but there will still be something to be added which I myself saw.” Herodotus' methodology includes autopsy, judgement/assessment of data and inquiries. For a recent discussion of ἱστορέειν see Nikolaidou-Arabatzi (2018).

⁹ See for example the Scythian-Logos 4.5-13. Herodotus deems one version unbelievable (4.5.1: ἐμοὶ μὲν οὐ πιστὰ/) but reports it anyway. See also 4.25 and elsewhere.

¹⁰ The Herodotean Paradox. See the discussion by de Bakker and Baragwanath (2012: 2ff).

¹¹ 7.152.3: ἐγὼ δὲ ὀφείλω λέγειν τὰ λεγόμενα, πείθεσθαι γέ μὲν οὐ παντάπασιν ὀφείλω, καί μοι τοῦτο τὸ ἔπος ἐχέτω ἐς πάντα λόγον· “It is my duty to report what has been said, but not to believe all of it. This is the case for all of my work.” Herodotus saw a need to put this statement in, obviously thinking about reporting the truth (See also 2.123). As Corcella (2013: 51) points out: the “affirmation of the duty to λέγειν τὰ λεγόμενα serves therefore to forestall the criticism that others might aim at him, and of which he is perfectly aware.”

¹² See de Bakker and Baragwanath (2012: 3).

¹³ From Aristoteles' μυθολόγος (De An. Gen. III 5.756b7) and Cic. Leg. 1.5 (... apud Herodotum patrem historiae ... sunt innumerabiles fabulae) to E. Meyer (1892-9) (Herodotus was more interested in stories than accurate facts) and Aly (1969) (Herodotus as on the one hand *Märchenzähler* and on the other “true” historian). Momigliano (1958) and Immerwahr (1966) looked at Herodotus more as narrator and how he presented and structured his inquiries. After Fehling (1971) and others of the “liar school” questioned the accuracy of Herodotus' presentation of sources, more recently Griffith (2001), de Jong (2002), Pelling (2007), Munson (2007) see anecdotes and stories as an important part (as a theme or on a symbolic level) of the main narrative.

¹⁴ The matter of terminology and determination what exactly constitutes a myth versus a logos is not the topic of this article. I agree with de Bakker's and Baragwanath's (2012: 11) statement that “a formal restriction of two

It would not do Herodotus justice to simply claim that he included the stories so they could entertain. While this may have played some role in how Herodotus chose and presented his material,¹⁵ the stories nevertheless require thorough analysis and interpretation.¹⁶ Both are necessary or at least helpful to fully understand the inquiries into which they have been embedded.¹⁷ Seen in this way these stories in the *Histories* are similar in function to the epic similes in Homer.¹⁸ One can assume that Pseudo-Longinus had this in mind when he called Herodotus a foremost student of Homer. (μόνος Ἡρόδοτος Ὀμηρικώτατος ἐγένετο).¹⁹

When Herodotus describes the upbringing and taking over of power by Cyrus, the extraordinary circumstances presented in short stories are plenty. Starting with the visions of Astyages (1.107-108), they grant Herodotus the opportunity to convey material that "will help his fifth-century Greek readers understand its larger cultural relevance — in effect, grid it in the larger Greek *imaginaire*" (Dewald, 2012: 60). Through the stories Herodotus' audience becomes familiar with the origins of the Persian

terms with such a wide range of meanings, both in- and interdependently, would impede rather than stimulate creative thought and interpretation."

¹⁵ See Wesselmann (2016: 136) who argues that where Herodotus has a couple of versions to choose from and he reports the ones he thinks are untrue, he does so "on account of their entertainment value" which she however classifies as being in certain cases "too light a term". She correctly states that "... the inclusion of a false story can be motivated by more than *poikilia*. ... it may contain another level of truth beyond factuality, such as very typical behaviour that is perfectly captured in a non-factual story that therefore deserves to be included." (137) In this paper one such non-factual story - how Cyrus became leader of the Persians - is interpreted to find this "level of truth" that gives us more information about Cyrus' skills as a leader.

¹⁶ Since Herodotus claims that there are three different versions of Cyrus' history (1.95.1: ... , ἐπιστάμενος περὶ Κύρου καὶ τριφασίας ἄλλας λόγων ὁδοὺς φῆναι. "... , while I know that there exist three other reports about Cyrus") it is tempting to think that he chose number four because it seemed to him the most entertaining one. Herodotus seems to have been aware of this problem. He explains that he chose his version because that was the one that some Persians presented to him. These Persian men according to Herodotus used as criteria for reporting Cyrus' history the truthfulness of the events (... βουλόμενοι ... τὸν ἔοντα λέγειν λόγον "wanting to tell it like it was").

¹⁷ The anecdotes supplement events of the major narrative and inquiries. See Dewald and Marincola (2006: 14): "Herodotus frequently employs digressions ... to give necessary or important background or supplementary information." See also Griffiths (2001: especially 161). Griffiths (2006: 134) calls the digressions "knots and burrs in the growth of Herodotus' narrative grain."

¹⁸ A question that arises is: Was there a "coded communication" involved between Herodotus and his audience as Scott (2009: 31) suggests for Homer in his use of similes? He writes that Homer communicated with his audience "not only through words and phrases but also through silent communication (e.g., repeated motifs with conventional connotations, consciously excluded options)."

¹⁹ Subl. 13.3

empire.²⁰ In some way the stories helped to understand or enhanced familiarity with Herodotus' inquiries in the fifth century. It surely was important what Herodotus did or did not assume as common knowledge; it shaped the way of how he presented his inquiries. A close reading and interpretation help us to detect the way in which Herodotus used mythic material to increase understanding.²¹ As an example, let us have a look at chapters 125-126 in the first book. We find here Cyrus giving “gnomic declarations” and being involved in “actions following gnomic wisdom”, as Dewald puts it.²²

After Cyrus has heard from Harpagus that the Medes are ready to revolt against Astyages, he looks for the “most clever” (σοφωτάτω) way to persuade the Persians to start a revolt. (1.125.1) First he tells the leading Persian tribes that Astyages wants him to be the leader of all Persians.²³ Then Cyrus commands these Persians to come back with a sickle: (1.125.2: Νῦν τε, ἔφη λέγων, ὦ Πέρσαι, προαγορεύω ὑμῖν παρῆναι ἕκαστον ἔχοντα δρέπανον.) How could Cyrus issue a command like this at this point? He has just made up a story that he has been announced leader of the military by Astyages and has not given the tribes any proof of his capabilities as a leader before. Apparently, Cyrus' claim to have the support of Astyages enables him to demand leadership because he now has the backing of the dominant party, in this case the king of the Medes; however, the question remains why the leading Persian tribes are supposed to see Cyrus as being capable of leading the military. Herodotus makes this clear in more subtle ways.

All of the Persians follow the orders of Cyrus: they appear with sickles (1.126.1: ὡς δὲ παρῆσαν ἅπαντες ἔχοντες τὸ προειρημένον). Herodotus emphasizes that all Persians heeded his command by using ἅπαντες. Cyrus then commands them again, making them work very hard clearing a large thorny tract of land (1.126.1-2: ..., ἐνθαῦτα ὁ Κῦρος (ἦν γὰρ τις χῶρος τῆς Περσικῆς ἀκανθώδης ὅσον τε ἐπὶ

²⁰ See Chiasson (2012: 214): “... Herodotus employs myth as a means of familiarizing, explaining, and enhancing for a Greek audience the historical origins of the Persian empire and its founder.”

²¹ I follow here Dewald's (2012: 60) determination in what constitutes mythic: “... genealogies, picturesque background details, and even religious miracles and traditional story elements.”

²² Dewald (2012: 79). According to Dewald Herodotus presents in book one “individual actors thinking and speaking to others in ways echoing those of earlier folklore; ... the major plot lines of the narrative also contain pattern, traditional tropes A number of actors in Book One deliver themselves of gnomic mots, little sayings, improving speeches and even parables similar to those found in wisdom literature” (60) The task at hand is to uncover the purpose of how some of these sayings and parables relate to the main narrative.

²³ According to Herodotus Cyrus does not belong to a royal family (1.107.2). Cyrus himself famously claims to be of a royal bloodline on the Cyrus Cylinder line 21. See the translation in Kuhrt (2007) and Pritchard (1950: 315-16). For an analysis of Cyrus and the kingdom of Anshan see Potts (2005).

ὀκτωκαίδεκα σταδίους ἢ εἴκοσι πάντη) τοῦτόν σφι τὸν χῶρον προεῖπε ἐξημερῶσαι ἐν ἡμέρῃ). Once again, without the claim that a mighty power was backing him up Cyrus could not have ordered the foremost Persian tribes (the ones “from whom all the others were dependent”: ἐξ ὧν ὄλλοι πάντες ἀρτέαται Πέρσαι 1.125.3) to carry out this task.²⁴ Besides, the readiness to follow shows that the Persian leading tribes see in Cyrus a man capable of using the military might that Astyages supposedly provided to his advantage. By following Cyrus’ orders, they validate the trust that Astyages apparently has put in Cyrus.²⁵ Thus it is implied that Cyrus has the qualities of a leader, especially regarding the military. Herodotus supports this in subtle ways: The clearing of land happened in a short period (within one day: 1.126.1: ἐν ἡμέρῃ) and was completed in that time frame (1.126.2: ἐπιτελεσάντων δὲ τῶν Περσέων), a fact which is emphasized by Herodotus by repetition and by beginning the sentence with the *genitivus absolutus*. Furthermore, Cyrus apparently organized the clearing himself. The simple farming activity²⁶ thus becomes a symbol of military leadership. In addition, the tool that was used to clear away the thorns – δρέπανον – usually carries within Herodotus’ *Histories* the meaning of “scimitar” or “curved knife”.²⁷ Metaphorically, the hacking away at thorns invokes the battlefield under the leadership of Cyrus.

After the tract of land has been cleared, Cyrus tells the Persian leaders to come back on the following day. Cyrus in the meantime prepares a feast consisting of the meat of goats, sheep and oxen in addition to wine. Cyrus provides all kinds of foods that are “most suitable” (1.126.2: ... σιτίοισι ὡς ἐπιτηδεοτάτοισι). Herodotus’ use of the superlative regarding the suitability of the provisions gives us another important detail about Cyrus’ capabilities. He prepares a feast for the Persians, and, while doing so, Herodotus shows him being diligent about picking things that are most likely to make his guests happy, things “most suitable” for a feast. In order to know what is most suitable (that is, what will satisfy the leading Persian tribes at the feast), Cyrus needs to know the inclinations of his guests. Herodotus shows here that Cyrus possesses the qualities of a diplomat; he knows the people he is dealing or negotiating with, he is informed about their inclinations, wishes, dislikes, and he is capable of using this

²⁴ See Erbse (1992: 39) who writes that it is entirely unlikely (“vollends unwahrscheinlich”) that the Persians without argument (“widerspruchlos”) took on the pointless task (“sinnlose Arbeit”) of cutting down the thorny bushes.

²⁵ For this analysis it is irrelevant that Cyrus actually plans to overthrow Astyages by following Harpagos’ advice (1.123-124).

²⁶ The type of work reminds Herodotus’ audience of the toils of slaves which Cyrus later suggests the Persians are to the Medes (1.126.5): Ἄνδρες Πέρσαι, οὕτως ὑμῖν ἔχει· βουλομένοισι μὲν ἐμέο πείθεσθαι ἔστι τάδε τε καὶ ἄλλα μυρία ἀγαθὰ, οὐδένα πόνον δουλοπρεπέα ἔχουσι· “This is how it stands for you, Persians: if you obey me these and thousands of other good things are yours and you have no slave-like toil.”

²⁷ See 5.112.2 and 7.93

information to his own advantage. Cyrus was well informed since the feast is a total success. Collectively, the Persian elite responds to Cyrus' question as to which of the two days they liked more: the one when the feast was given (1.126.4: οἱ δὲ ἔφασσαν ... τὴν μὲν γὰρ προτέρην ἡμέρην πάντα σφι κακὰ ἔχειν, τὴν δὲ τότε παρεούσαν πάντα ἀγαθά.)

This episode corresponds with the anecdote that Herodotus tells us in 1.114. There the historiographer describes Cyrus at the age of ten playing with other boys. These friends, some of whom are of noble birth, choose Cyrus, who at this time is considered to be the son of a cowherd, to be their leader. Then Cyrus assigns various tasks to his friends. Herodotus summarizes that Cyrus gave each boy the proper task (1.114.2: ὡς ἐκάστῳ ἔργον προστάσων). Cyrus was thus able to identify the specific talent of each of his friends. The talents become apparent when we take a closer look at the tasks that Herodotus lets Cyrus assign: the building of houses (τοὺς μὲν οἰκίας οἰκοδομέειν), acting as guards (τοὺς δὲ δορυφόρους εἶναι), acting as spies (τὸν δὲ κου τινὰ αὐτῶν ὀφθαλμὸν βασιλέος εἶναι), and delivering messages (τῷ δὲ τινὶ τὰς ἀγγελίας φέρειν ἐδίδου γέρας). Herodotus characterizes Cyrus as having the ability to judge the qualities of those around him and making the correct assumptions about where their talents lie.²⁸ He then uses those talents to his advantage. This theme is again taken on by Herodotus in 1.126. What Herodotus further emphasizes in 1.126 is Cyrus' diplomatic prowess, once again using a short story embedded into his inquiries to emphasize qualities or flaws of the protagonists in his work.

Is Herodotus describing a leader fit only for Persians or do we find here the description of a leader that could serve the Greeks as well? Cyrus serves as an example on various levels.²⁹ When we assume that Herodotus wrote parts of the *Histories* during the early stages of the conflict between the Athenians and the Spartans and their allies,³⁰ the thought of or wish for a capable diplomat to prevent (further) bloodshed or the desire to have a great military commander to end it was surely on his mind. If we put the composition of (parts of) the *Histories* at an earlier time, Athens' growing dominance in the Delian League, with all its complications, surely created criticism,

²⁸ For an analysis in how these talents represent the institutions of the Median monarchy see Munson (2009: 459-60).

²⁹ Avery (1972: 529) for example writes that Herodotus in the *Histories* “seems to have been especially interested in using Cyrus as a sort of moral abstraction – a model or exemplar – who is cast in certain roles and who serves certain functions.”

³⁰ For a thorough discussion of the date of the publication of the *Histories* see Sansone (1985) and more recently Irwin (2013 and 2018) who argues for a publication date at the end of the Peloponnesian War as a response to Thucydides' work.

some opposition, and the wish for an able diplomat.³¹ One could argue that it is this wish and a warning that Herodotus alludes to, especially since the *Histories* in general can be understood as a critique of (Athenian) imperialism, as has been pointed out frequently.³² The recurrent motif of the “warner” plays such an important role in the *Histories* (Bischoff, 1932) on many levels that Herodotus very likely follows this theme, i.e., he issues an implicit warning with this description of how Cyrus became leader, especially if we link it with the end of the *Histories*.

The conclusion of Herodotus' work has frequently been understood as a warning for the Athenians to not become another empire that ends in slavery like the Persians;³³ however, what if Herodotus, in addition to that, saw a need for a capable (Athenian) general to either use diplomatic means to stop war (with the Spartans) from breaking out or end an ongoing conflict?³⁴ Cyrus dies in the end because of his arrogance, which led him to underestimate the Massagetae; nevertheless, an admiration shines through when Herodotus describes Cyrus' capabilities.³⁵

The story in 1.125-126 is one more example of Herodotus delivering his worldview in the form of - usually short - interruptions of the main narrative.³⁶ They break the rhythm and allow the author to convey additional material or support his main ideas or better, motifs. Of course, it is difficult to determine if these ideas are of the author himself or of his protagonists as described by him; but we can reasonably conclude that certain motifs and ideas were on the historian's mind.³⁷ The particulars

³¹ See Desmond (2004: 20) who sees Herodotus' inquiries as “a warning to the Athenians that with the emergence of the Delian League, a new cycle of tragic history may be beginning.”

³² See Greenwood (2018: 178): “... Herodotus' *Histories* clearly do offer us a trenchant critique of imperialism as both an historical and contemporary phenomenon, ...” See also Raaflaub (1987: 247). He concludes regarding Herodotus' message in the *Histories*: “if the hunger for power becomes excessive, if imperialism, disregarding justice and the rights of others, is pursued to the extreme and becomes a goal in itself, then disaster is inevitable.”

³³ See for example Moles (1996: 259-284). The title of his paper reveals the theme: “Herodotus warns the Athenians”. He also describes the ending as “brilliant” (273). See also Flowers and Marincola (2002: 303): The ending of the *Histories* “brings together those themes which have permeated the entire work and, at the same time, alludes to the new themes of the post-war world.”

³⁴ Depending on when Herodotus wrote the *Histories*.

³⁵ Besides the more practical capabilities Cyrus also shows “Apollonian moderation” (Cizek, 1975: 541), especially when he pardons Astyages and in his dealings with Croisus.

³⁶ See Baragwanath (2008).

³⁷ See Ostwald (1991: 147) who argues regarding Herodotus and his worldview that cities gain and lose importance over time (1.5.4), that “it is inconceivable that a man holding these views was unaware of or

of when and where Herodotus wrote the *Histories* cannot be known; however, there exists a basic tendency throughout the work that shows that Herodotus is favorable towards certain city-states and less so to others. This should help us interpret passages that otherwise seem odd, either because of their place within the main narrative, their content, or their structure.

If we assume that Herodotus started writing the *Histories* - or at least started collecting notes as early as 460 BCE - Athenian imperialism in the succeeding years would have provided ample opportunities for the historian to witness the necessity for either restraint or aggressiveness on the Greek side, i.e., the need for able diplomats and military men.³⁸

Reading Herodotus and looking for indications of supremacy of Western Civilization will provide many examples when Eastern monarchs, such as Xerxes, abuse their power. However, it is equally possible to interpret Herodotus' work as evidence of positive values, customs, and traditions, regardless of the geographic region. He was born in Ionia, the important area that served as link between the two regions divided generally into East and West; surely, he was aware of the influence the Eastern civilizations had on the city-states around him. And he certainly must have appreciated the impact and value of the achievements of "the others." Why would he choose to write his enormous collection not only of war-related events but also of the customs, geography, deeds etc. of so many different ethnic groups of people over a large geographic area? He provides an answer in the opening lines of the *Histories*: he wants to make sure that the memory of the great deeds of Greeks and Non-Greeks is preserved. If Herodotus provided the blueprint for the later-claimed dichotomy between Eastern and Western civilizations, he did so unintentionally.

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indifferent to the events going on in his own contemporary world, dominated as it was by the imperial policy" of Athens).

³⁸ Herodotus might even have changed his attitude towards Athens with its role as "policeman of the Aegean" (Wells, 1928: 321) over the course of his life, from supporter to warning critic.

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