



Malcolm Davies (Oxford, United Kingdom)

Sabine Müller (Kiel/Siegen, Germany)

DEIOCES THE MEDE - RHETORIC AND REALITY IN HERODOTUS 1.99

Keywords: Herodotus, Deioces, Media, Achaemenid Court Ceremony

Introduction

Δηϊόκης πρῶτός ἐστι ὁ καταστησάμενος, μήτε ἐσιέναι παρὰ βασιλέα μηδένα, δι' ἀγγέλων δὲ πάντα χρᾶσθαι, ὁρᾶσθαι τε βασιλέα ὑπὸ μηδενός, πρὸς τε τούτοισι ἔτι γελᾶν τε καὶ ἀντίον πτύειν καὶ ἅπασι εἶναι τοῦτο γε αἰσχρὸν (Hdt. 1.99.1).

In Herodotus' account of Deioces' dispositions after acquiring power, there is an oddity that has hitherto escaped attention, though it will repay a closer examination. According to the historian, *no-one* was allowed into the king's presence; *all* business was to be conducted via messengers; *no-one* was to see the king; and even laughing and spitting in his presence was unacceptable. On the face of it, this passage is contradictory and incoherent: if *no-one* was allowed into the king's presence, the further ban on spitting and laughing in that presence is pointless, quite apart from the further complication of the role of messengers, which must have involved *someone* entering the king's presence. But the apparent inconsistency may actually emerge as deliberate and purposeful, once interpreted as an example of a rhetorical or stylistic device to which several scholars have drawn attention.¹

¹ Especially Macleod 1982, 129 on *Il.* 24.498, to whom the cited paraphrase of Thuc. 1.97.2 is owed, and Rood 1998, 230, n.16. The latter refers to Lattimore 1958, 11–12, which discusses

By this device, an author makes an exaggerated or hyperbolic statement and then ‘corrects’ or modifies or qualifies his own exaggeration, without cancelling or withdrawing it. Perhaps the clearest instance is Thucydides 1.97.2, paraphrased by one scholar as “everyone before me omitted this period... and the one man who did handle it, Hellanicus, did so cursorily and inaccurately”. By resorting to this device, Thucydides conveys the devastating verdict that Hellanicus’ account was so inadequate that, to all intents and purposes, it might as well not exist. It will aid clarity of presentation if we next turn to classifying more carefully than has hitherto been done the examples of this device that earlier scholars have amassed. These examples can be laid out under three headings.

Statement followed by immediate Qualification

Of this the simplest and most basic instance is πάντας ἔπεφν’, ἕνα δ’ οἶον ἴει οἴκονδε νέεσθαι (*Il.* 4.397) where the correction is so immediate that it hardly registers as such, any more than in the English phrase ‘all but one’. Almost as simple is the instance in Priam’s instructions οἶον. μηδέ τις ἄλλος ἅμα Τρώων ἴτω ἀνήρ/κῆρῦξ τίς οἱ ἔποιτο γεραίτερος (*Il.* 24.149–150). Note the absence of any connective (let alone adversative) particle to introduce the ‘correction’. From the famous first *stasimon* of Sophocles’ *Antigone*, note ἄπορος ἐπ’ οὐδέν ἔρχεται τὸ μέλλον· / Ἴαῖδα μόνον φεῦξιν οὐκ ἐπάξεται (360–361). Again one observes the absence of connective particle. From Herodotus there is, at its most simple, ἐποιέετο στρατηίην ὁ Ἀρισταγόρης ἐς Σάρδις. αὐτὸς μὲν δὴ οὐκ ἐστρατεύετο ἀλλ’ ἐν Μιλήτῳ ἔμενε, στρατηγοὺς δὲ ἄλλους ἀπέδεξε (5.99.1–2). Almost as simple is ἐν δὲ πλείστον ἔθνος Πέρσας αἰρέετο, ἄνδρας στρεπτοφόρους τε καὶ ψελιοφόρους, ἐπὶ δὲ Μήδους. οὗτοι δὲ πλῆθος μὲν οὐκ ἐλάσσονες ἦσαν τῶν Περσέων, ῥώμη δὲ ἥσσονες (*Hdt.* 8.113.3). Slightly more complex is *Hdt.* 4.188: θύουσι δὲ ἠλίῳ καὶ σελήνῃ μούνοισι· τούτοισι μὲν νυν πάντες Λίβυες θύουσι, ἀτὰρ οἱ περὶ τὴν Τριτωνίδα λίμνην νέμοντες τῇ Ἀθηναίῃ μάλιστα, μετὰ δὲ τῷ Τρίτωνι καὶ τῷ Ποσειδέωνι. In view of the discussion below concerning the origin of this rhetorical device, it is interesting to read what Denniston has to say involving backward reference and a repeated word, and relating to continuous speech: “the speaker objects to his own words, virtually carrying on a dialogue with himself”.²

what he calls ‘the progressive style’. He exemplified this from the three passages of Herodotus from Books 4, 5 and 8 considered below and went on to cite some less clear-cut instances, e.g. 1.18: ‘[Sidyattes] was at war for 11 years.... Sidyattes was ruler for 6 of the 11 years and in the final 5 Alyattes was ruler’, where it is not perfectly clear who is the subject of the initial verb.

² Cf. Denniston 1954, 478 and also 479 on “corrective μέν οὖν”.

Statement followed by Qualification at a greater Distance

Two speeches by Priam from *Iliad* 24 may introduce this class: 255ff. (addressed to his surviving and degenerate sons): τέκον υἱας ἀρίστους ... τῶν δ' οὐ τίνα φημι λελεῖφθαι ... τοὺς μὲν ἀπώλεσ' Ἄρης, τὰ δ' ἐλέγχεα πάντα λέλειπται (a rhetorical way of saying “I have no sons”) and the similarly structured 494–499 (addressed to Achilles): τῶν δ' οὐ τίνα φημι λελεῖφθαι ... τῶν μὲν πολλῶν θοῦρος Ἄρης ὑπὸ γούνατ' ἔλυσεν· ὃς δέ μοι οἶος ἔην, εἴρυτο δὲ ἄστῃ καὶ αὐτούς; *Od.* 12. 66–72 (Circe to Odysseus): “no ship yet has sailed through the Planctae ... only the Argo, thanks to Hera’s help” (which is thus emphasized); Xenophon *Anab.* 7.4.6–7: “Seuthes killed *all* the men he captured ... a handsome young prisoner was spared on the point of being killed”; Diodorus’ “styptic earth” (5.10.2) “is found nowhere else in the world except the city of the Liparians ... it is found also on the island of Melos, but the deposit there is small” (so the generalization is virtually true). Somewhat more allusive is Thuc. 5.25.1: τοῖς μὲν δεξαμένοις αὐτὰς (scil. σπονδάς) εἰρήνην ἦν.

“Not ... and if he/who actually did ...”

Finally, a smaller class, to which belongs the Thucydidean instance with which we began: τοῖς πρὸ ἐμοῦ ἅπασιν ἐκλιπὲς τοῦτο ἦν τὸ χωρίον ... τούτων δὲ ὅσπερ καὶ ἦψατο ... Ἑλλάνικος, βραχέως τε καὶ τοῖς χρόνοις οὐκ ἀκριβῶς ἐπεμνήσθη (1.97.2). Formally similar are Thuc. 6.24.3–4 (on the Athenian enthusiasm for the Sicilian Expedition): ἔρωσ ἐνέπεσε τοῖς πᾶσιν ὁμοίως ... εἴ τῳ ἄρα καὶ μὴ ἦρεσκε and 8.66.2 ἀντέλεγέ τε οὐδεὶς ἔτι τῶν ἄλλων ... εἰ δὲ τις καὶ ἀντίποι of which it has been observed³ that “the whole point is that those few human counter-examples were not around for very long, so that the word ‘nobody’ was right after all”; Ctesias (*FGrHist* 688 F68): ἰατρὸς οὐδεὶς ἐδίδου ἐλλέβορον, ... εἰ δὲ τις καὶ ἐδίδου ...

We have by now established that Herodotus certainly used the stylistic device in question. Does Hdt. 1.99 fit any of the above categories? The answer is that it fits neatly in the first. The passage’s initial exaggeration is very marked, with negative and positive aspects placed chiasmatically: μηδένα ... πάντα ... μηδένα. The following phrase πρὸς τε τούτοις ἔτι leads one to expect a climactic topping of the hyperbole, and this expectation lends an appropriate air of paradox to what follows, with the apparently banal everyday actions of spitting or laughter elevated to the status of high offences (observe the effect of the particle in the closing words of the sentence: τοῦτό γε αἰσχρόν – “even this is [treated

³ Cf. Hornblower 2008, 43.

as] foul”⁴. But when seen as a whole, the passage falls into the same pattern as the others considered above. To bring out the points of resemblance, we might paraphrase: “no-one was allowed into the king’s presence except for the few messengers; no-one was to set eyes on the king and those few who were allowed must not spit or laugh”. Appropriately enough, the closest parallel is the somewhat more compressed passage cited above from Herodotus’ friend and kindred spirit Sophocles (*Antigone* 360f.): ἄπορος ἐπ’ οὐδὲν ἔρχεται τὸ μέλλον· Ἄϊδα μόνον φεῦξιν οὐκ ἐπάξεται.

Richmond Lattimore discussed virtually the same technique, which allowed “the presence of contradictions left standing in the text”,⁵ in connection with Solon 13 W, and detected a similar process in some of the *epinicia* of Pindar. He also found a large scale instance in Herodotus Book One, where our author, like Solon and Pindar, allows a contradiction to stand or rather, “the correction is made without advertisement during the development of the narrative”.⁶ The reference is to Herodotus’ claim that Croesus was the first eastern potentate to harm the Greeks: the narrative which follows makes it clear that Gyges and his successors had similarly injured the Greeks before Croesus came on the scene. Lattimore envisaged the historian, like Solon and Pindar, as composing literature “written *forward*, as if the writer were speaking rather than writing ... but must, driven forward, negate the content by some further statement which will express the truth as he now understands it”. In a later article he made pretty much the same point: “the writer ... thinks of himself as a speaker who, when he has contradicted himself ... cannot go back to correct... but must make the correction as he goes forward”.⁷ The coincidence of this general picture with the inference drawn above from the parallels to the particles in Hdt. 4.188 (as if “a speaker is carrying on a dialogue with himself”) is surely very striking.

It is impossible not to see the relevance to all this of the tradition that Herodotus originally recited his Histories publicly in Athens and elsewhere. Also relevant is Lattimore’s perception that Herodotus represents a transitional stage between orality and literacy.⁸ Macleod’s discussion of the phenomenon stated that “it is one form of the parataxis typical of Homer, but is not confined to oral

⁴ Cf. Denniston 1954, 116.

⁵ Lattimore 1947, 171. Lattimore 1958, 10–11 returned to the issue of Croesus’ supposed priority.

⁶ Lattimore 1947, 172–173.

⁷ Lattimore 1958, 9. Hornblower 2008, 947 is unhappy about the potential implications of the expression taken literally, since ‘Th[ucydides] did not start either sentence in a too-sweeping way and then say to himself “oh, that’s not quite right”, and then qualify it’. Certainly the *effect* is more sophisticated, but the *fiction* of a change in direction of the thought expressed is allowable.

⁸ See especially Lattimore 1958, 11–12, approved by Fehling 1971, 175; 1989, 250–251 discussing Herodotus as “a transitional stage between orality and literacy”.

poetry”,⁹ and we should recall that parataxis has been seen as a particular feature of Herodotean style.¹⁰

His language (especially the phrase “cannot go back”) reveals that even so sensitive a critic as Lattimore, who did more than anyone to illuminate this aspect of Herodotean technique, could not quite rid himself of the lurking assumption that the author is the victim rather than the master of his technique, someone who has to press forward rather than returning to correct because he has no choice. It is indicative that he declines to interpret Pindar’s use of a similar technique as “deliberate artifice”.

But even in a written text it would be rhetorically very effective to begin with an attention-grabbing exaggeration and then water it down by modification. Original oral delivery¹¹ could have given Herodotus the opportunity for the presence of “correcting in his stride”.

What was the precise function of Herodotus’ exaggeration? It probably serves the purpose of highlighting the alleged inaccessibility of the Median king, who was portrayed as a forerunner of the Persian king and his court etiquette.¹² Thus, the carefully constructed figure of Deioces, a blend of common Greek ideas on tyrants and oriental rulers is presented as the *protos heurtes* of Median court ceremony as a political self-fashioning of the Median king.¹³ To keep his distance from his former aristocratic equals, he begins to develop certain strategies to show that he was a special and lofty person.¹⁴ To Greek eyes, an important element of the Persian court ceremony elevating the great king was precisely this loftiness and inaccessibility (Xen. *Cyr.* 7.5.37, 41) which marked his autocratic position, but was also regarded as a sign of tyranny. The practice of ceremonial receiving in particular was taken to be a demonstration of the king’s will

⁹ Macleod 1982, 129.

¹⁰ Cf. Immerwahr 1966, 47ff. (contested by Bakker 2006). For a more technical treatment see the dissertation of Lamberts 1970. For a brief but helpful introduction to the issue see Dewald 1998, xixf.

¹¹ For other examples of the alleged influence of original oral delivery upon Herodotus’ style see e.g. Pohlenz 1937. For a more recent assessment of the issue see Slings 2002, 53–77 and General Index of *Brill’s Companion to Herodotus*, 2002, s.v. “orality”.

¹² Cf. Asheri 2007, 150–151; Patzek 2004, 53–73.

¹³ See Wiesehöfer 2004, 15–26; Bichler/Rollinger 2001, 68. In fact, due to the absence of any archaeological evidence for the organized Median Empire that Greek authors like Herodotus describe, severe doubts have recently been raised as to whether such a Median empire ever existed at all. Cf. Rollinger 2005, 11–29; Sancisi-Weerdenburg 1988, 197–212. It is suggested instead that the Greeks developed the idea of such a centralized Median empire in order to explain the time gap between the decline of the Assyrian and the rise of the Persian Empire, thereby casting the probably fictitious Median Empire in the role of transitional transmitter of certain traditions from the Assyrian to the Persian Empire. Cf. Wiesehöfer 2003, 391–396.

¹⁴ Cf. Müller 2010, 251–265.

to enslave the population by forcing them to commit the *proskynesis* erroneously thought to be a sign of his being honoured as a god.¹⁵ In fact, far from demanding complete inaccessibility, the Persian Great King openly received his leading aristocrats, as is probably shown in the famous relief from the palace of Persepolis.¹⁶ He had to be visible to produce a marked effect on the audience. Herodotus' account of Deioces' invention of Median court ceremony, centering as it does on the exaggeration that allegedly "no-one" was allowed to see him, therefore formed part of the traditional Greek stereotype concerning the tyranny of the Persian kings.

Of course, Herodotus elsewhere shows that he knew better. In his account of the revolt of the seven Persians against the false usurper Smerdis, he points out that the fraud raised the suspicions of the Persian noble Otanes, because the usurper never appeared in public or received any Persian noble in audience (3.68.2): καὶ ὅτι οὐκ ἐκάλεε ἐς ὄψιν ἐωυτῶ οὐδένα τῶν λογίμων Περσέων.¹⁷ This is a clear contradiction of the claim that the Persian king was inaccessible. In the case of the false Smerdis, it is precisely his invisibility that leads to his exposure in the eighth month of his reign (3.68.1). And, Herodotus emphasizes the radical nature of his behaviour by stressing that the Magus Smerdis was seen by none of the Persian nobles.

Bibliography

- Asheri, D. et al. 2007: *A Commentary on Herodotus, Books I–IV*, Oxford.
- Bakker, E.J. 2006: 'The syntax of *historie*: How Herodotus writes' in C. Dewald, J. Marincola (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Herodotus*, Cambridge, 92–102.
- Bichler, R., Rollinger, R. 2001: *Herodot*, Darmstadt.
- Denniston, J.D. 1954: *The Greek Particles*, Oxford².
- Dewald, C. 1998: 'Introduction' in *Herodotus. The Histories*, translated by R. Waterfield, Oxford.
- Fehling, D. 1971: *Die Quellenangaben bei Herodot*, Berlin.
- Fehling, D. 1989: *Herodotus and his 'Sources'*, Leeds.
- Hornblower, S. 2008: *A Commentary on Thucydides*, Vol. III, Oxford.
- Immerwahr, H.R. 1966: *Form and Thought in Herodotus*, Cleveland.
- Köhnen, A. 1980: 'Herodots falscher Smerdis' *WJb* 6a, 39–50.
- Lamberts, E. 1970: *Studien zur Parataxis bei Herodot*, Vienna.
- Lattimore, R. 1947: 'The First Elegy of Solon' *AJP* 58, 161–179.
- Lattimore, R. 1958: 'The Composition of Herodotus' *Histories*' *CP* 53, 9–21.
- Macleod, C. 1982: *Homer: Iliad Book 24*, Cambridge.

¹⁵ Cf. Nep. 9.3.3; Isocr. *Pan.* 151; Plut. *Alex.* 54.2; Ael. *VH* 1.21.

¹⁶ Cf. Walser 1965, 22.

¹⁷ See Köhnen 1980, 39–50.

- Müller, S. 2010: 'Deiokes und die limitierte Mimik. Zu Herodot 1.99' in Chr. Hoffstadt et al. (eds.), *Was bewegt uns?*, Bochum-Freiburg, 251–265.
- Patzek, B. 2004: 'Die Deiokes-Erzählung im Rahmen der Persergeschichten Herodots: eine konsequente Reihe historisch-erzählerischer Sinngebungen?' in M. Meier et al. (eds.), *Deiokes, König der Meder. Eine Herodot-Episode in ihren Kontexten*, Stuttgart, 53–73.
- Pohlenz, M. 1937 (repr. 1961): *Herodot. Der erste Geschichtsschreiber des Abendlandes*, Leipzig-Berlin-Darmstadt.
- Rollinger, R. 2005: 'Das Phantom des Medischen Großreichs und die Behistun-Inschrift' in *Electrum* 10 (Kraków), 11–29.
- Rood, T. 1998: *Thucydides: Narrative and Explanation*, Oxford.
- Sancisi-Weerdenburg, H. 1988: 'Was there ever a Median empire?' *AchHist* 3, 197–212.
- Slings, S.R. 2002: 'Oral Strategies in the language of Herodotus' in E.J. Bakker et al. (eds.), *Brill's Companion to Herodotus*, Leiden, 53–77.
- Walser, G. 1965: *Audienz beim persischen Großkönig*, Zürich.
- Wiesehöfer, J. 2003: 'The Medes and the idea of the succession of empire in antiquity' in G.B. Lanfranchi (ed.), *Continuity of empire (?) Assyria, Media, Persia*, Padua, 391–396.
- Wiesehöfer, J. 2004: 'Daiukku, Deiokes und die medische Reichsbildung' in M. Meier et al. (eds.), *Deiokes, König der Meder. Eine Herodot-Episode in ihren Kontexten*, Stuttgart, 15–26.

Abstract

In his Median *logos*, Herodotus reports that no-one was to see the king. Thus, the remark that laughing and spitting in his presence was unacceptable seems to be contradictory. This paper explores the apparent inconsistency as an example of a rhetorical or stylistic device.