ESSAY

THE OVERDETERMINED UNIVERSE

THE PARADOX OF FREEDOM IN HERODOTUS'S *HISTORY*

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Herodotus's *History* is ostensibly about the war between the Greeks and the Persians, culminating in the battles at Salamis, Artemisium, and Plataea in 480 and 479 BC. Throughout his narrative, however, Herodotus intends not merely to recount the details of this particular struggle but also to reveal something of the nature of history itself. He therefore begins his account in book 1 not with undisputed facts but with the contentious and perhaps entirely mythical kidnapping of Io, the daughter of Inachus, by Phoenician merchants some seven centuries prior to the Persian invasion. This crime, according to the Persians, led to the still greater outrage at the Greeks' kidnapping of Europa and Medea, which in turn incited Alexander, the son of Priam, to abduct Helen to Troy.

The history of the war between the Greeks and the Persians is therefore linked by Herodotus from the onset to violent passions, archetypal heroes, and Homeric epic poetry—the sacred canon of Greek religion. It is in the realm of the irrational, myth, and the supernatural as much as in empirical analysis that we will discover the true nature and significance of historical events in Herodotus's narrative. The following questions therefore arise: What is the relationship between religious beliefs and the telling of history? What exactly are Herodotus's particular beliefs? And how do these beliefs shape his understanding and interpretation of historical events?

The cosmological assumptions that underlie Herodotus's *History* allow us to trace the logic of fate and its relationship to the idea of divine resentment (*phthonos*) in his masterpiece, and to explore the implications of Herodotus's fatalistic vision for ideas about

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human justice and freedom. Herodotus's praise of "freedom" is consistent with his belief in an "overdetermined universe," for political freedom need not imply a release from the overarching metaphysical or ontological fact of fate, nor need courageous action in defense of such freedom be based on the belief that humans can actually alter or control their destinies in any ultimate sense.

Perhaps the single most pervasive theme in Herodotus's *History* is the idea of human incomprehension and helplessness in the face of the divine will or fate. Only after it is already too late to avoid ruin does one discover what one should have done, suggesting that human hopes of freedom from fate are tragically illusory and pointing toward powerful, deterministic forces at work in all historical events. An oracle to Croesus, for example, informs the king that if he makes war on the Persians he will "destroy a mighty empire" (1.53).[1] Croesus assumes that this is a green light to attack, but when his campaign ends in defeat, the true meaning of the prophecy becomes clear: the mighty empire he would destroy is in fact his own.

Cleomenes similarly receives an oracle that he will capture Argos. But after accidentally burning down the sacred grove of the god Argus while in pursuit of his enemies, he realizes that he has fallen victim to a divine pun: "Argos" meant "Argus." His doom is now sealed as a result of his unwitting sacrilege (6.80). The ambiguity of divine communication, linked with the grip of fate, is emphasized in Herodotus's account of Cyrus, who—like Croesus, Cleomenes, and Cambyses—receives an accurate vision of his own demise but without discerning its true significance. In a vivid dream, Cyrus sees Darius's eldest son, with wings on his shoulders, overshadowing Asia and Europe. He assumes that this signifies a plot against his empire and so begins to take action against the house of Darius. "But to him the god was giving signs that he himself should die, right there where he was, and that his kingship should pass to Darius" (1.210). When events unfold along these lines, the power of the vision is upheld. Once again it offers no hope of humans acting so as to avert disaster. The teaching in each of these stories is clear: "For it is surely not in the nature of man to be able to turn aside that which is fated to be" (3.65).

Fate is not seen by Herodotus merely as an intermittent overruling of human freedom on the part of the gods or the divine will; for even when no specific oracle or divine revelation can be cited to explain why events unfold as they do, occurrences are still attributed a fortiori to the workings of fate. "Some time thereafter—for it was fated that Candaules should end ill—he spoke to Gyges thus..." (1.8); "Fate that is decreed, no one can escape, not even a god" (1.91); "But Naxos was not fated to be destroyed by *this* expedition" (5.33); "But fate had determined that evil should grow richly for Corinth from this child of Eetion" (5.92). Although Herodotus does raise doubts as to whether specific events should be attributed to the workings of specific gods or goddesses (see, for example, his account of the storm in 7.191), declarations such as these show that history for Herodotus is broadly understood as the outworking of an unseen and irresistible force.

Can we discern any rational cause in the *History* for why things occur as they do? Or is fate precisely that which confounds and overrules all reasons, trapping humanity in a never-ending round of "what will be will be"? There is, in fact, a discernible logic to the edicts of fate in the *History*. Although humans may not be able to discern any ultimate meaning in historical events, and

although Herodotus does not present any systematic account of the workings of fate, many of his stories suggest a pattern of divine jealousy or resentment (*phthonos*), whereby good fortune and success necessarily invite calamity and ruin.

This idea is set forth most forcefully by Artabanus in his counsel of prudence to Xerxes amid the general warmongering of Xerxes's court:

> "Do you see how it is the living things that exceed others in size that the god strikes with lightening and will not let them show their grandeur, while the little ones do not itch the god to action? Do you see how it is always the greatest houses and the tallest trees that the god hurls his bolts upon? For the god loves to thwart whatever is greater than the rest. It is in this way that a great army may be destroyed by a small one; for once the god has conceived jealousy against the great army, he may hurl fear upon it or his thunder, and it will perish in a way unworthy of itself. The god does not suffer pride in anyone but himself." (7.10)

Xerxes has already displayed his prideful character through his impious declaration that "we shall show to all a Persian empire that has the same limit as Zeus's sky" (7.8), and so it comes as no surprise when he rejects Artabanus's warning with foolish rhetoric: either you're with us or you're with the enemy—"There is no middle ground for this enmity" (7.11). Nor does it come as any great surprise when Xerxes's army is subsequently defeated. Hubris, Herodotus makes clear, will always tempt the wrath of the gods.

Apart from the obvious sin of pride, though, Artabanus's speech suggests that success is problematic *in itself.* Fate is constantly leveling the field, striking down those who try to raise themselves above the rest of humanity. To achieve great things, even with total humility and piety, invites great failure. Amasis of Egypt highlights this truth when he urges his friend Polycrates to try to be *less lucky*. "For I know that divinity is a jealous power. So for myself and those I care for, I would wish some successes and some failure in what happens and so to live life through with these variations rather than good hap in everything. For I have never yet heard in story of anyone whose good fortune was complete who did not end up in complete ruin" (3.40).

Polycrates wisely heeds Amasis's advice, casting his most beloved ring into the sea. But when the ring returns to his table in the belly of a fish, Amasis realizes that it is "impossible for one man to deliver his fellow man from what is by fate to happen to him" (3.43). He immediately severs all ties with Polycrates so as not to be implicated in his friend's demise. It is a demise that is not long in coming. Polycrates travels to Magnesia, against his daughter's pleadings, where, true to Amasis's predictions, he is betrayed by Oroetes and is murdered by crucifixion. One way or another, fate will have its way. And for Herodotus—as for the Phaeacians in Homer's *Odyssey*, who provoke Poseidon's wrath by the mere fact that they "escorted all mankind and never came to grief" (8.634)[2]—security and happiness are fleeting realities that continually elude humanity's grasp.

The world of Herodotus, E. R. Dodds concludes in his classic study *The Greeks and the Irrational*, is a world of "deepened awareness of human insecurity and human helplessness"—a world in which an "overmastering Power and Wisdom forever holds Man down, keeps him from rising above his station. . . . The gods resent any success, any happiness, which might for a moment lift

our mortality above its mortal status, and so encroach on their prerogative."[3] The idea of divine jealousy becomes in Herodotus a constant and "oppressive menace"; he interprets the lives of great kings in terms neither of external accident nor individual character, but in terms of "what had to be."[4] "For Herodotus, history is overdetermined: while it is overtly the outcome of human purposes, the penetrating eye can detect everywhere the covert working of phthonos."[5] Feelings of anxiety, dread, and fatalism, Dodds notes, were not widespread in primitive Greek religion later to be banished by the light of Ionian skepticism. Rather, these feelings became increasingly magnified and widespread in the Archaic and early Classical periods, until *phthonos* at last "became for Herodotus the underlying pattern of all history."[6]

The fatalism that pervades Herodotus's narrative leads, then, to a distinctly pessimistic attitude toward life, with death seen not as a tragic consequence of the human condition but as a welcome release from the vicissitudes of fortune. This theme is first explicitly stated in Solon's story of Cleobis and Biton early in book 1. The two brothers, in a mixed display of familial devotion and physical strength, serve as human oxen for their mother, pulling her by wagon to the temple at Delphi to attend the feast of Hera. As a reward for this feat, Solon tells Croesus, "the god showed thoroughly how much better it is for a man to be dead than to be alive," causing Cleobis and Biton to die that same night in their sleep, much to their mother's joy (1.31). To die with honor, the tale suggests, is the greatest possible gift bestowed by the gods: an honorable death is the *telos* of life.

Conversely, living is presented by Herodotus as a kind of purgatorial waiting, since the truly good or blessed individual is the one whose life has come to a satisfactory end. Croesus assumes that he is the most blessed individual in the world because of his great wealth and political accomplishments. But Solon underscores the vanity and tenuousness of all human affairs this side of the grave: "One must look always at the end of everything—how it will come out finally. For to many the god has shown a glimpse of blessedness only to extirpate them in the end" (1.31). When King Psammenitus of Egypt is conquered by Cambyses, he weeps not at the murder of his son or the enslavement of his daughters but at the ruin of one of his advisers who "has lost all and become a beggar when he is upon the threshold of old age" (3.14). For Herodotus, like Achilles in the *Iliad*, premature death by physical violence is thus actually preferable to a long and happy life that ends poorly.

Next to the Greeks, the Persians, and the Egyptians, the North African Trausi tribe are even more emphatic in their pessimism about temporal existence. Whenever an infant is born within the tribe, Herodotus reports, "The kinsfolk surround the newly born and lament for him, for all the ill he must endure, once he has now been born, and they set forth all the sufferings of men." The dead, however, "they hide in the grave with joy and delight and say over him what evils he is now quit of and how he is now in perfect happiness" (5.4).

From this hint of an afterlife or place of "perfect happiness" for the dead, it would be tempting to leap to the conclusion that the widespread pessimism about earthly existence recorded by Herodotus was, at an even deeper level, based on optimism about some kind of a better life in the hereafter. But while Herodotus does speak on occasion of ghosts and "Oracles of the Dead," there is little sense in the *History* that death might be a doorway to anything analogous to the Christian heaven. Instead, we are struck by

the sense that it is precisely the annihilation of consciousness that makes death so desirable. When Xerxes is moved to pity contemplating the shortness of human life, Artabanus declares that there is an even greater cause for pity: the *length* of human life:

> "Short as his life is, no man is so happy—either of these or all the rest—that it shall not be his lot, not only once but many times, to wish himself dead rather than alive. For there are calamities that meet him and diseases that derange him, so that they make this life, for all its shortness, seem long. So death comes to be for man a most desirable escape from a life of wretchedness. And therein is the god discovered to be envious; for he gives us but a taste of the sweetness of life." (7.46)

In addition to being jealous and capricious, then, the gods are actually seen in the *History* to be malignant toward mortal beings. They grant humans "but a taste of the sweetness of life" not in order to lessen their misery but in order to heighten it.

Religious devotion in the world of Herodotus is therefore based not on any great love for the deities but on terror at what the gods might do if provoked, betrayed, or slighted. This leads to the necessity of conspicuous and bloody sacrifices to propitiate the divine will (or wills). In the case of the Scythians, the rites attending the death of a king would include the strangulation of fifty young men, who would then be impaled on stakes and mounted on dead horses in a circle about the grave (4.72). Before the Persians cross the river Strymon, the Magi cut the throats of white horses in the hopes of receiving a favorable omen, and then, on reaching the other side, bury alive nine boys and nine girls of the local inhabitants as a gift to the god of the underworld (7.114). And Pausanias, after defeating the Persians at Plataea, orders that one tenth of all the plunder be assigned as a tithe to the god at Delphi, sufficient to construct two great statues to Zeus and Poseidon (9.82).

The Greeks may have been less inclined than others to slay humans as religious offerings. In the *Iliad*, Achilles ritually sacrifices twelve Trojan youths in honor of his fallen friend Patroclus, but Agamemnon's murder by his wife Clytemnestra was seen by later Greeks, at least in part, as a punishment for his having sacrificed his daughter Iphigeneia to the goddess Artemis. "The sickening in men's minds, tough, reckless in fresh cruelty brings daring," declares the chorus of his deed in Aeschylus's *Agamemnon* (222–23).[7] Yet while the Greeks by the time of Herodotus were hesitant to offer humans as sacrifices to the gods, they were no less anxious than other races to appease the gods through animal and material sacrifices. Gyges dedicates vast amounts of silver and gold to the temple at Delphi to avoid divine punishment for having usurped the throne (1.13). Similarly, Croesus slaughters three thousand animals "of each kind" (the kinds are not listed) and burns a great pyre of couches overlaid with gold and silver and other precious artifacts "expecting that thereby he would be likelier to win the favor of the god" (1.50). The gods of the Greek pantheon, like the gods of all other peoples in the *History*, demand a considerable investment in capital and animal (if not so often human) blood.

Beyond the necessity of propitiating the gods themselves, people in the world of Herodotus live under the murky thrall of various ghosts, shades, and other spiritual entities. These, no less than Zeus, Apollo, and Athena, might at various times demand the attention and devotion of the living. When Periander consults the Oracle of the Dead as to the whereabouts of a treasure

hidden by his deceased wife Melissa, he is told that Melissa is cold in her grave and will not help him until she is made warm. Periander promptly summons all the women of Corinth to the temple of Hera, where his guards forcibly strip them naked. He then sets fire to their clothes in a great pit while offering up the suitable dedicatory prayers. Shortly thereafter, the Oracle, speaking on behalf of Melissa's ghost or spirit, discloses the location of the lost hoard (5.92). There is a hierarchy of terror in Herodotus, with the spirit world occupying a slightly lower level of fear and obligation than the gods, and fate meanwhile presiding over humans, ghosts, and gods alike.

The case of Periander and Melissa underscores the problematic nature of justice in the *History*; for what is required to satisfy the "justice" of the Oracle is a brazen act of injustice by any human standard. Periander's treatment of the women of Corinth is only slightly less shameful than that of the Persians toward the women of the house of Amyntas; yet whereas the Persians receive their comeuppance at the hand of Alexander (5.19–20), Periander is positively rewarded by the Oracle, having pursued his self-interest within the bounds of religious piety. Such a gulf between social and religious ethics means that human motives need not factor into the scales of cosmic justice.

Instead, divine punishments might be meted out with equal severity for accidental or intentional deeds, for the sins of one's self or the sins of one's ancestors, with "sins" being understood less as inherently wrong or unjust actions against fellow human beings than as impious deeds committed against the gods. Why does Cleomenes go mad and kill himself by grisly self-mutilation? Not for having murdered the Argives per se, but for killing them *after* they took sanctuary in the sacred forest of Argus (6.75). Why does Miltiades die of gangrene in his thigh? Not for leading the Athenian navy on a frivolous and violent piratical expedition, but for sneaking into the temple of Demeter the Lawgiver to steal a sacred object or commit some other mischief against the shrine (6.134). Why is Mycerinus's life cut short? Not for anything he has done or failed to do, but because of a blind edict of fate—an edict that earlier allowed his father and grandfather to rule their subjects contemptuously with impunity (2.133).

The Persian invasion of Greece is closely linked in Herodotus's *History* to the desecration of sacred shrines and the destruction of Greek temples, particularly the burning of the Acropolis. He leaves us with the distinct impression that Xerxes's final defeat had more to do with Persian impiety than with Greek military strategy or moral superiority. When a flood tide from the sea drowns a significant number of the Persian army, for example, the Potidaeans conclude that this occurred "because the barbarians behaved sacrilegiously toward the temple and image of Poseidon," and Herodotus heartily agrees: "I think they are right in the cause they give" (7.129). After the Greek victory at Salamis, Themistocles declares: "It is not we who have done the deed but the gods and the heroes, who grudged that there should be one man to lord it over both Asia and Europe—a man, moreover, impious and reckless. Did he not treat alike temples and private property, burning and overthrowing the images of the gods?" (8.109). It is significant that when the Athenians urge their fellow Greeks to refuse to negotiate with Xerxes, they do so primarily by appealing to Greek religious devotion:

> "There is not enough gold in the world anywhere, nor territory beautiful and fertile enough, that we should take it in return for turning to the Persian interest

> and enslaving Greece. There are many things that stand in our way of doing so even if we wanted to; there are, first and greatest, the shrines of the gods and their images, burned and destroyed; it lies upon us of necessity to avenge these to the uttermost rather than make terms with him who did these things . . . those shrines of the gods belong to us all in common." (8.144)

The word *necessity* (*ananke*) in this passage is weighted with religious and philosophical significance and should be read alongside the statement of the anonymous Persian soldier who laments Persia's impending doom to Thersander:

> "Sir, what comes from God, no man can turn back. Even if what was said [to Xerxes's commanders] was credible, no one would believe it. Many of us Persians know all this, but we follow in the bondage of Necessity (*ananke*). This is the bitterest pain to human beings: to know much and control nothing." (9.16)

"Necessity" here is, implicitly, what fate (*moira*) is armed with over and against human intelligence and will. To say as the Persian soldier does that one must do something *of necessity* is to invoke the power of fate itself. It is to despair of the power of human choice in the face of brute circumstance.

When the Athenians declare that it lies on them "of necessity" to defend their sacred shrines, we therefore detect a similar fatalism at work. Because the Persians have profaned the Greek temples, the Athenians declare, they cannot accept the Persian peace terms "*even if we wanted to*" (8.144). Their celebrated defense of "freedom" is in fact predicated on a strict religious or metaphysical determinism. Whether in actual fact the Athenians were so religiously motivated to defend their city may be debated. But within the framework of Herodotus's narrative, the Greeks are compelled to resist Xerxes by a force beyond their control, by an unavoidable and sacred duty to avenge "to the uttermost" the Greek gods.

Why the Athenians should be so concerned about avenging the gods Herodotus does not say. But from what he has already told us about the gods and fate, we might infer the following. To fail to protect the sacred shrines of one's homeland for immediate gain or personal security would, ultimately, invite only calamity; for even if a people somehow managed to avoid payment in their own lifetime, their descendants would be confronted by implacable divinities and evil fortune until the debt was fully paid. Croesus, we recall, is struck down not for his own sins but "for the offense of his ancestor [Gyges] in the fifth generation" (1.91). The Spartans, after killing Darius's envoys, are cursed with unfavorable omens and oracles by the ghost-envoy of Agamemnon, Talthybius, and the curse is only lifted some seventy-five years later, when two Spartan envoys to Asia are murdered in kind (7.134–38). Confronted by the awesome and fatelike power of Persia, the Greeks might shirk their duty to defend the honor of the gods. But in the end, Herodotus suggests, this would merely lead to still greater pains and penalties in the pitiless grip of fate itself.

In a peculiar sense, the reason the Greeks fight in the *History* therefore amounts to a profound negation of history as most of us in the West under the influence of the Judeo-Christian vision have come to understand it. Time—the condition or context for what would be truly significant events and creative acts—is effaced or collapsed by vindictive gods into a singular metaphysical fact: the sins of the future are contained in the sins

of the present, while the present reverberates with the sins and vanity of the past. This is not liberating, as is the idea of an eternal present in some forms of Jewish and Christian mysticism; for it serves primarily to reinforce the notion of fate—immutable, terrifying, and often cruel—as the ground of all being.

The *History* presents a strict geometry of cosmic justice (not always, as we have seen, synonymous with human justice) that admits little if any possibility of release, escape, or redemption. The symmetry is perfect and so perfectly enclosed. The economy of belief that confronts us in the *History* is the economy of the wheel. Fatalism, pessimism, divine jealousy, and the caprice of the gods come together in a vision of history and life that is cyclical, deterministic, and, in the final analysis, grim. History is the tale of humanity reaping what has already been sown. Herodotus states the matter obliquely at the start of his narrative: "For of those that were great in earlier times most have now become small, and those that were great in my time were small in the time before" (1.5). Croesus is more explicit: "All human matters are a wheel, and, as it turns it never suffers the same men to be happy forever" (1.207).

Against the above reading of Herodotus it might be argued that not everything in his account is explicitly reduced to the workings of fate. Natural causes and human will generally "work" without any reference to *moira* as such. Further, the doctrine of fatalism leads to a number of ambiguities and tensions that cannot be satisfactorily resolved. I have tried to show through a close "plain" reading how fate functions in Herodotus's narrative as a kind of impersonal and inscrutable force. But if fate is impersonal and over all, how can he also speak of divine jealousy or *phthonos*, with its implications of personality, vindictive passion, and a kind of reason of its own? Does not the one idea cancel out the other? Or do *moira* and *phthonos* somehow converge so that history becomes, as Dodds says, "overdetermined"?

Further, how are we to understand the Athenian declaration, "Yet we have such a hunger for freedom that we will fight as long as we are able" (8.143)? Or Dionysius's speech to the Ionians: "Men of Ionia, our fortunes are on the very razor edge of decision; whether we will be freemen or slaves" (6.11)? Or Herodotus's own assertion that when the Athenians were still in subjection to princes, "they would not do their best, for they were working for a taskmaster, but, when freed, they sought to win, because each was trying to achieve for his very self" (5.78)? What is the relationship between the freedom spoken of in these passages and the theme of fate woven so pervasively throughout the text?

The seeming contradiction between the two ideas, fate and freedom, may not be as intractable as first appears. I will not attempt to defend the coherence of the doctrine of fate in the *History*, since, in the final analysis, I do not believe fatalism is entirely coherent. Still, it may be that "freedom" in the *History* is subordinated to fate without being negated by it in a way that we can grasp. Localized political "freedom" need not imply a release from the overarching metaphysical fact of fate, nor need courageous action in defense of such freedom be based on the belief that humans can actually alter or control their own destinies in any ultimate sense.

When Leonidas makes his heroic stand against the Persians at Thermopylae, for example, he does so not with the expectation of success but from a conscious desire to fulfill the Pythian's prophecy that Sparta would be saved through the destruction of one of its kings. His defense of Spartan freedom stems from his desire to win glory—the only sure immortality—precisely by fulfilling a prede-

termined fate. Nor is it the hope of victory but the sense of an enclosing and inescapable doom that spurs the Spartans to battle: "For the Greeks, knowing that their own death was coming to them from the men who had circled the mountain, put forth their very utmost strength against the barbarians; they fought in a frenzy, with no regard for their lives" (7. 223).

Harmocydes similarly urges the Phocians to battle not with the rhetoric of freedom but with a steely admonition to courage at the edge of the abyss:

> "It is clear that these men are going to send us to our death—indeed, it stares us in the face.... So now it behooves each of you to be a good man and true; for it is better to end your life in action and defense of yourselves than to offer yourselves to a death of the greatest dishonor. But let each one of our enemy know that they are barbarians and that those whose murder they have contrived are men of Greece." (9.17)

Individuals in the *History* are therefore free to act "existentially" in defiance of an unfolding fate, even as they affirm the fundamental rule that fate will, in the end, have its way—an attitude exemplified in the *Iliad* by Hector, who does his duty and fights for his people even though he knows that Troy is doomed. "Fight for your country," he declares, "that is the best, the only omen!" (12.281).[8]

There is also a kind of freedom, or seeming freedom, in *ignorance* that does not invalidate Herodotus's essentially cyclical and deterministic view of history. As long as one does not know what one's fate is, the best one can do is act as if one is free. When Artabanus urges Xerxes not to tempt fate by invading Greece, Xerxes does not deny that "the event will be the master of man rather than the other way around" (7.49). Nevertheless, he declares, "It is better to have a brave heart and endure one half of the terrors we dread than to make forecalculation of all the terrors and suffer nothing at all.... [For] how can a human being know what security is?... It is those, then, who are willing to act who for the most part win the prizes" (7.50).

Throughout the *History*, Herodotus has repeatedly foreshadowed Persia's defeat through the theme of the haughty ruler whose overweening pride tempts the wheel of fate. We can therefore sense the tragic blindness in Xerxes's words. Yet we also sense that Xerxes, within the philosophical and religious framework Herodotus has given us, is correct: absent clear knowledge of one's fate, one can only behave *as if* one were free, *as if* one's actions might in fact make a difference. Herodotus does not present a simple dichotomy between freedom-loving Greeks on the one hand and fatalistic Persians on the other. Xerxes's decision to proceed with his campaign stems from a positive disregard for fate that in the end actually leads to the fulfillment of his fate. Cyrus is meanwhile seen rallying the Persians to overthrow the politically oppressive Medes with the same cry later taken up by the Greeks: "Listen to me, and become free men" (1.126). "Freedom" in the *History* is not the antithesis of fate, nor is the grip of fate weakened by the kind of relative political freedom that inspires men—Greeks and on occasion also Persians—to arms.

If both Greeks and Persians share the same cyclical and fatalistic view of history, Herodotus nevertheless does seem keen to impress on his readers a distinctly Hellenic sense of what it means to be "free" as over and against the way of the Persians. Demaratus's fearful analysis of the Greek fighters reveals, I believe, the

underlying importance of the clash between East and West in Herodotus's narrative—a clash of fate and freedom not in the realm of metaphysical values but rather in the more concrete realm of political and legal formation. Despite their scant numbers, Demaratus warns Xerxes, the Greeks will prove a formidable foe, especially the Lacedaemonians:

> "Fighting singly, they are no worse than any other people; together, they are the most gallant men on earth. For they are free—but not altogether so. They have as the despot over them Law, and they fear him much more than your men fear you. At least they do whatever he bids them do; and he bids them always the same thing: not to flee from the fight before any multitude of men whatever but to stand firm in their ranks and either conquer or die." (7.104)

The Law of the Lacedaemonians in this passage is conspicuously like a Persian tyrant. Indeed, this is precisely what Demaratus calls it: a "despot" feared even more than Xerxes himself.

The celebrated freedom of the Spartans is, strictly speaking, freedom to "do whatever he [the Law] bids them to do." They, like the Persians, are primarily *free to obey*. What is more, the edicts of Law in battle are not much different from the edicts of Xerxes. Both command stoic resolve at the point of the spear; one must either vanquish or perish in the effort. Yet obedience to the Law is superior to Persian obedience to an absolute monarch in at least one critical regard: the Law "bids them always the same thing." Whereas both Persian monarchs and Greek Laws may hold absolute power over their subjects, rule by tyrant will often be capricious and unpredictable. Rule by Law will, at a minimum, be consistent.

This has radical consequences for politics and social order. For when the "law" is embodied in a person, a single all-powerful ruler, the ruler can engage in cruel and unreasonable acts simply because he can. There will be only a vague and ill-defined conception of justice, since "justice" must correspond, above all, with the tyrant's own stormy will, the same as the will of a god or inscrutable fate. Hence Cambyses forces Sisamnes's son to sit as judge on a throne covered with his own father's skin (5.25). Hence Xerxes awards his helmsman a golden crown for saving his life only to remove his head for failing to save the rest of his men (8.118). Hence Pheretima cuts the breasts off the women she conquers and impales the Barcaeans on the walls of their city (4.202). As Cambyses's scribes declare, the most important law in Persia is that "he who was king of Persia could do anything he wished" (3.31).

Among the Greeks, at least in Herodotus's telling, we do not find comparable acts of senseless cruelty and grinding tyranny. Rule by Law, even the severe martial code of the Spartans, has a mitigating effect upon the raw exercise of power. In the world of Herodotus, we have therefore not yet departed from the cyclical view of history. We have not yet escaped the wheel of fate. Indeed, rule by Law may be a logical corollary to the idea of fate, with the language of fate tending to be invariably legalistic ("Fate that is *decreed*, no one can escape, not even a god"). Yet within the Greek conception of Law as Despot, whether Spartan or Athenian, we discover inklings of freedom—not freedom from determinism, but a partial reprieve from the savageries of caprice. The gods remain capricious, to be sure, but in Greece it is less likely that rulers will have the chance to be. Somehow this is worth fighting for, and somehow this makes life less bitter. †

1 All references to Herodotus are by book and section number from Herodotus, *The History*, trans. David Grene (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).
2 Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 292.
3 E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951), 29.
4 Ibid., 30, 42.
5 Ibid., 30.
6 Ibid., 44.
7 Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* in *The Complete Greek Tragedies: Aeschylus*, trans. Richard Lattimore (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 41.
8 Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 333.

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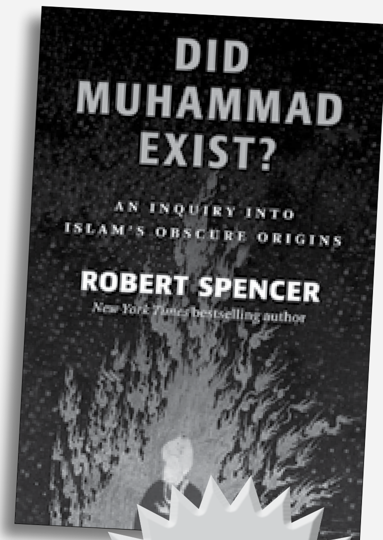

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