

## A NOTE ON THE PERILS OF PROSPERITY IN HERODOTUS

The following paragraphs consider all occurrences of four words which cluster together to constitute a theme in Herodotus: namely, that explicitly mentioned good fortune acts as a sign to the reader of impending doom. Of course, this theme, which some might even label an imperfect ideology, has long since been noticed by readers and critics. I have failed to find, however, a recognition of his indirect, even subtle, technique for conveying this message (as well as others). By analysis of these few examples, we shall see that Herodotus chooses his vocabulary most carefully, reserves some words for specialized functions, and by repetition subliminally underscores his own world-view<sup>1</sup>).

The words here considered for which Herodotus has fashioned a single pregnant meaning are *akmazō*, *akinētos*, *eutych-* compounds, and *euprēxiē*. By restricting his employment of them to foreshadow future calamities, he both underlines their significance of danger when they occur, and without offensively intruding as author, he universalizes the meaning of certain historical facts. He does not hereby pester us with the sterile theories of Ionian philosophers about "rise and fall" – a sin from which he is not entirely free (e. g., 1.5.4). He prefers, however, to enlarge the scope of a few otherwise everyday words without distorting the historical facts which he is reporting.

The word *akmazō* (flourish) appears five times in Herodotus<sup>2</sup>), on four occasions to describe cities, each of which shortly thereafter suffers capture, often with sack and desolation. Sardis "abounded in wealth supreme" when Solon visited it; soon

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1) These elementary literary claims never seem sufficiently proven to philologists despite the elegant paragraphs of J.D.Denniston, *Greek Prose Style* (Oxford 1952) 5–8. A.Ferrill, "Herodotus on Tyranny", *Historia* 27 (1978) 385–98, examines *tyrannos*, *basileus*, *despotēs*, and *mounarchos* and proves that our author clearly distinguishes amongst them.

2) Statistics based on J.E.Powell, *A Lexicon to Herodotus* (1938; reprint Hildesheim 1966). The other ref.: 2.134.2, Rhodopis enjoyed a *floruit* long after the pyramid builders. This last shows that Herodotus did know of a neutral meaning for the word which he employs in a specific, semi-technical context.

after, Cyrus captured it, ended Croesus' empire, and began to devastate the city (1.29.1 and 86.1). Siphnos was richest of the Aegean islands and flourished in all its affairs, when the exiled Samians arrived; they ravaged the island, defeated Siphnos' militia and soon extracted a one hundred talent "indemnity" from the hapless, besieged islanders (3.57.2 and 58.3-4). Miletus outdid its own previous prosperity and was the commercial and artistic glory (*proschēma*) of all Ionia – just before it decided to promote the unfortunate revolt of Ionia. Six years after, at least in Herodotus' account, most of the males were slaughtered, the women and children were enslaved, and the temple of Didyma stripped of its treasure and burnt down (5.28 and 6.18-22.1, esp. 19.1). Finally Sybaris' legendary wealth is mentioned parenthetically in the list of Agariste's suitors; we have already learned of its subsequent defeat and desolation (6.127.1 and 5.44.1)<sup>3</sup>).

Of three objects Herodotus uses the adjective *akinētos* (unmoveable). Herodotus, indebted to the pre-Socratics and not least to Heraclitus, shows *inter alia* that "everything moves and nothing keeps still"<sup>4</sup>). When we meet this adjective, then, the irony is patent. Semiramis' sealed tomb, although protected by a weighty curse, is robbed by huckster Darius; the inviolable holy objects of Demeter's sanctuary on Paros barely escape Miltiades' intended sacrilege; and most impressive, Apollo's sacred isle of Delos, previously unshaken, is racked by earthquake (1.187.3, 6.134.2, 6.98.3 [*bis*]).

Herodotus employs *eutych-* as a stem twenty-eight times: the verb thirteen, the adverb once, the noun ten, and the adjective four times<sup>5</sup>). The peculiarity to note is that on twelve occasions, nearly half, it refers to all-too-lucky Polycrates<sup>6</sup>). The

3) Although Sybaris conforms to the pattern of "the bigger they come, the harder they fall" (3.40.3\*, 5.92ζ-η\*, 7.10ε\*), we confess that in this case the pattern is not stressed.

4) Plato *Cratyl.* 402a: πάντα χωρεῖ καὶ οὐδὲν μένει.

5) Powell, s.v. *εὐτυχής*, records that three of the four exx. present themselves in Solon's speech to Croesus.

6) Verb: 3.40.1, 40.2\* (*bis*), 40.3\*, 43.1, 44.1; noun: 40.1, 40.2\*, 40.3\*, 40.4\*, 125.4; adverb: 39.3. Similarly *συμφορή*, in the sense of "calamity", appears twenty-two times in all the *Histories*, but already six times in the story of Atys and Croesus (1.35.1, 35.4\*, 41.1\*, 42.1\*, 44.2, 45.1; also the climactic *bapax legomenon* and neologism *βαρυσυμφορώτατος*, 45.3; cf. H. Immerwahr, *Form and Thought in Herodotus* [Cleveland 1966] 157, note 24). This does not mean that Herodotus "nods", but rather that his ironical stance can use a single word as an axis for the graph of a life as he plots it out. "It is the very dotage of criticism to suppose that Herodotus was

Samian met success in his every venture (3.39.3), a very bad portent as his quondam friend Amasis realized (40.3\*). The stem appears seven times in thirteen *OCT* lines (3.40.1–3), not counting synonyms (e. g., *eu prēssonta*). Unlimited good fortune seems to be a guarantee of coming catastrophe. Polycrates' attempt to moderate his beatitude only meets further incredible good luck. At beginning and end of his tale, the central motif of unmoderated good fortune is expressly marked *ex cathedra* (3.39.3 and 125.4).

No different are Herodotus' other "lucky" characters. Solon unsuccessfully warns an ignorant Croesus of the dangers of prosperity (1.32.6\*, 7\*)<sup>7</sup>, and Croesus, later knowing more of such things, unsuccessfully tries to offer Cyrus at the height of his success similar wisdom (1.207.2\*). Herodotus emphasizes that Cyrus determined to embark on his fatal campaign against the Massagetae *just when* it seemed that, as with Polycrates, his every military venture would be crowned with victory (1.204.2)<sup>8</sup>. Croesus had not tried to avoid the consequences of success; Polycrates had tried but did not succeed; Artabanus repeatedly fails to make Xerxes see the light, but for the reader of the earlier books of Herodotus, the dramatic irony is by now manifest. Artabanus refers to divine jealousy (7.10ε\*, as Solon, Croesus, and Amasis had done), psychological obsession (7.16β–γ\*), the human condition (7.46.3\*), and hard logistical realities (7.49.4–5\*) – all to no avail. Nothing can convince Xerxes to abandon his decision. Xerxes, as usual in Herodotus, offers the most elaborate and important example of the mistaken mortal and of this particular nexus.

The noun *euprēxiē* (success), appearing twice, conforms to our pattern: once Artabanus tries to warn Xerxes against believing his success will continue forever; the other time, Xerxes gloats as he sends back to Susa, that is to his regent Artabanus, news of the capture of Athens – just before the scene switches to Salamis (7.49.4\*, 8.54), where news of a less happy sort will be made.

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unaware of his own devices", as R. Macan says, *Herodotus: the Seventh, Eighth, and Ninth Books* (London 1908) xcii.

<sup>7</sup> See, for the paradigmatic function of this speech, M. Pohlenz, *Herodot* (1937; repr. Darmstadt 1973) 113–15.

<sup>8</sup> Note the identical phrase here and at 3.39.3: *ὄκη* (= *ὄκον*) γὰρ *ἰθὺσει στρατεύεσθαι, κ.τ.λ.*

A few men, indeed, obtain from Herodotus reference to their good fortune without soon after suffering for it, but only when their history is tangential to the main narratives, incomplete in Herodotus, or unimportant: the Spartans' sixth-century victories, Artemisia at Salamis, and Minos' thalassocracy (1.65.1, 8.87.4 and 88.3, 1.171.3)<sup>9</sup>). Equally insubstantial but much more typical are the references to Ameinocles' sudden wealth counterbalanced by his murder of his own child, the Thebans' luck in living through the slaughter at Thermopylae counterbalanced by their subsequent execution or branding as Persian slaves, and finally Syloson's spectacular good fortune consequent on giving Darius a cloak, which is counterbalanced by his receiving his wished-for reward, Samos, but entirely destroyed and emptied of its inhabitants (7.190, 7.233.2, 3.139.2). In these three examples, Herodotus evidently mentions "good luck" only to show that blessings are rarely unmixed, or rather, are rarely *in fact* blessings at all.

We have found, then, that a momentous elevation, when signalled by certain words, is in itself ominous and portentous. Herodotus employs and repeats these otherwise ordinary words to prepare his audience for a peripety.

I do not wish to exaggerate the *fabula docet* aspect of Herodotus. The essential point of this brief demonstration – which can be further documented by examining Herodotus' use of *eudaimōn*, *eudaimoniē*, *eu prēssō*, *epairō*<sup>10</sup>), etc. – is that Herodotus mentions the prosperity of important figures when and only when disaster soon followed. A conspicuous elevation is likely to prove slippery for the beneficiary. Excessive prosperity interests our author as part of a nexus: it is the material equivalent of *hybris*, moral excess. Often enough wealthy and

9) Achaemenes' reference to good fortune is blind, Themistocles' conditional and *in futuro* (7.236.1\*, 8.60a\*).

10) H. C. Avery, "A Poetic Word in Herodotus", *Hermes* 107 (1979) 1–9, on *epairō*, well demonstrates Herodotus' restriction of this word (indicating "elation") to situations ominous of incipient disaster. *Epairō* appears 15 times in Herodotus' text, 14 times with a portentous meaning. Eight of these occurrences refer to the paradigmatic figures of Croesus, Cyrus and Xerxes. They occur in clusters and underline "excessive" aggression, against Persia, against Tomyris' Massagetae, and against Hellas. *ὄλβιος*, *per contra*, denotes an outward prosperity, and often an inward happiness, which is, comparatively speaking, unambiguous and secure. See, e.g., 1.216.3, 6.24.2, 8.75.1, and especially 1.30\*–32\* (eight from a total of sixteen occurrences, eleven of which concern Croesus). See C. De Heer, *ΜΑΚΑΡ-ΕΥΔΑΙΜΩΝ-ΟΛΒΙΟΣ-ΕΥΤΥΧΗΣ* (Amsterdam 1969) 71–72.

prosperous states – such as Athens, Sidon, Cyrene, Syracuse – are not expressly noted for “good fortune”, although they enjoyed it, *because* they continued to enjoy it. Just as laughter in Herodotus is pleasant for the subject at the moment but semiological of impending doom for the reader<sup>11</sup>), so especial prosperity is meant to inform us that inevitably the pendulum will swing in a contrary direction – at least when it is conveyed by the words here surveyed.

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<sup>11</sup>) See D Lateiner, “No Laughing Matter: a Literary Tactic in Herodotus”, *TAPA* 107 (1977) 173–82.