

Visualizing Herodotus' Arion

The Arion episode in Herodotus (1.23-4) has attracted much attention from scholars because of its apparent oddity: the story of a poet being forced by pirates to throw himself overboard only to be carried across vast reaches of the sea on the back of a dolphin begs the reader to explain how such a striking incident relates to its context within Book 1 and the *Histories* as a whole (Cobet 1972, Flory 1978, Gray 2001). Several details within the episode are essential to understanding the episode as part of Herodotus' greater project. One such detail, which has gone largely unremarked by scholars, is the overwhelming emphasis Herodotus places upon the fact that the poet Arion is in full *skeuê* when he throws himself into the sea. Five times Herodotus mentions his *skeuê*—a term that can refer to Arion's dress and/or his other equipment of performance, like his cithara (LSJ, *s.v.*). I will argue that this emphasis, which Herodotus builds by mentioning the *skeuê* thrice before Arion leaps and twice afterward, is inseparable from the author's pursuit of the theme of vision (*opsis*) as a criterion for believing the veracity of accounts of past events.

Arion's garb forms an important link between two parallel stories of investigation (*historia*) within the episode. The exterior story is that of Herodotus' own investigation, in which he confirms what the Corinthians and Lesbians say about Periander's interaction with the poet by seeing Arion's "bronze, not big" votive statue at Tanaerum. The interior story is that of Periander's investigation into the veracity of Arion's story about his dolphin ride, which the tyrant hears straight from the poet's mouth. The interior story provides an instructive "mirror" for the exterior tale, as Gray 2001 observes. But we can expand Gray's analysis by paying attention to Herodotus' emphasis on Arion's *skeuê*. The *skeuê* is the crucial bit of "material evidence" that allows Periander to verify Arion's story, and in this role, it mirrors the votive

statue mentioned by Herodotus. Although the sailors who forced Arion to jump overboard give a different story upon being questioned by Periander, they must admit their guilt when Arion appears “just as he was he was when he jumped off the ship (in full *skeuê*).” The fact that Arion’s clothing is referenced yet again (for the fifth time) in this reveal moment suggests that it is an important factor in the pirates recognizing the poet, or it is at least an important factor in shocking them into telling the truth. Thus, Periander is able to confirm the believability of one story over another. In the case of both Periander investigating Arion and of Herodotus investigating Periander, *opsis* is the means by which *akouê* acquires verisimilitude.

Modern scholars, trying to verify Herodotus’ story of Arion, have followed Herodotus’ methodology regarding *opsis* and *akouê*, but perhaps they have not paid careful enough attention to Arion’s *skeuê*. Using their own *opsis* of various coins minted in Corinth, Methymna and Tarentum showing heroes riding on dolphins, they have suggested that Herodotus was misinterpreting a statue that commemorated the Laconian foundation of Tarentum or that represented a god (Head 1911, How-Wells 1928, Asheri 1988). However, these numismatic dolphin riders are invariably nude, whereas Herodotus’ emphasis on Arion’s *skeuê* suggests that the historian made a conscious effort to distinguish “decked-out” Arion from these iconographic parallels (cf. *LIMC* s.v. “Arion,” “Phalanthos,” “Taras”). The *skeuê* detail seems to anticipate the audience attempting to verify Herodotus’ account (*akouê*) through *opsis* of coins, statues, or other images of dolphin riders.

By understanding Arion’s *skeuê* in visual terms, we gain a greater understanding of the importance of vision to verisimilitude in Herodotus’ literary and historical methods, an importance which Herodotus alludes to in other narratives in Book 1, such as the display of Candaules’ wife naked (1.9) and the use by Peisistratus of visual deception to regain the tyranny

at Athens (1.60). Indeed, Herodotus appears to have foregrounded Arion's escape so early in his narrative in order to prompt us to keep our eyes open for visual cues in the rest of the work.

Bibliography

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