

## Food and the Philosophy of Empire: Herodotus 9.82

After the Battle of Plataea, Herodotus relates an anecdote about Pausanias' reaction to Persian wealth. When he comes across Xerxes' tent, he has the Persian slaves prepare a typical meal of the Persian elite. He then has his own slaves prepare a traditional Spartan meal. Pausanias is amused at the difference and calls the Greeks together, saying "my purpose in asking you all here is to show you how stupid the Persian king is. Look at the way he lives and then consider that he invaded our country to rob us of our meager portions!" (9.82). Scholarly response to this scene has been two-fold. First, Herodotus has Pausanias set up a display that proves one of the main themes of the *Histories*: that soft countries should not attack hard ones (Bowie 2003, Vasunia 2009). Second, the scene, along with Pausanias' laughter, serves to foreshadow Pausanias' eventual Medizing (Fornara 1971; Lateiner 1989). I propose that Herodotus includes this scene in order to highlight cultural difference and to show that Pausanias takes the wrong lesson from the Persian meal. His misinterpretation foreshadows not only his own downfall, but also problems in how Sparta exercises power.

Herodotus creates a strong association between food and power in his presentation of the Persians (Munson 2001). When Croesus wants to attack the Persians, his advisor Sandanis warns him against it because the Persians' "food consists of what they can get, not what they want" (1.71). If Croesus wins, he will gain nothing from it; but if he loses, he will lose everything. His statement is somewhat undercut, however, by his description of how Cyrus incites his Persians to rebel against the Medes, their first step towards empire. As an object lesson on conquest, he sets up two days, one of hard work clearing land and one of feasting, and then goes on to explicitly connect slavery with working the land and freedom with conquest and eating good food (1.127). This connection is reinforced by Cyrus' advice at the end of the *Histories*: "it is impossible for

one and the same country to produce remarkable crops and good fighting men” (9.122). The Persians associate luxury with conquest.

The relationship between Spartan food and power is not emphasized in the *Histories*, although he does mention the communal mess as one of Lycurgus’ innovations on the Spartan constitution (1.65). Our picture of Spartan meals comes from later sources. Xenophon plays on the comparative meal scene in Herodotus at the beginning of the *Cyropaedia*, where he compares Persian and Median meals. Plutarch describes the simple Spartan meal in detail in his *Life of Lycurgus*. Spartan food is simple and signature. They avoid outside influences in their lives and in their food (Hodkinson 2000). The Spartans associate simplicity with power.

The comparison of the meals after Plataea is paradigmatic for the misunderstanding between the two cultures. Herodotus tells us that the Persians enjoy large meals with many courses—this is analogous to enjoying their large empire with many different subject states. The Persians attack so that they can continue to have big meals. It is not a matter of amassing wealth, but rather maintaining a military society instead of having to shift into an agrarian one (a practice analogous to the Spartan practice of keeping their helots). The Persians will use and enjoy their wealth *and* they are warlike; their culture values warfare as a means and luxury as the goal. The Spartans value the military life *for itself*, and put limits on the trapping of wealth in all aspects of their lives. The Persians seek to strengthen their center by bringing more in; the Spartans strengthen their center by protecting it from influence. We can see this in how Sparta interacts with other city states and exerts its hegemonic power. Thus, the meals are emblematic of two kinds of power, rather than an ironic comparison of apparent strength.

## Works Cited

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