

A Persian Tyranny in the 5th century Athenian political discourse?

Did the 5th century authors based in Athens view Persia as a tyranny and the Persian monarch as a tyrant comparable to the 6th century Greek tyrants? I argue that, despite the prevailing view in modern scholarship, no such notion is detectable in the texts of authors dealing with Persia, most notably Aeschylus, Herodotus and Thucydides.

The question, which also fits into the broader theoretical framework developed around the ancient Greek ideas about ethnicity (Gruen 2020; McInerney 2014; Hall 1989), offers a key for interpreting the many passages in authors dealing with either Persia or the tyranny. Should we, for example, agree with Rood (1999: 150) that in Thucydides' narrative "the analogy between Athens and Persia is implicit... in various speakers' calling Athens a tyrant city (1.122.3; 2.62.3; 3.37.2)?" Are we meant to think of Persia every time Athens behaves like a tyrant? The implications of such a reading would be far-reaching for our understanding of the political discourse on the Athenian Empire, as well as Persia. Nevertheless, scholars have mostly viewed this connection as unproblematic. Raaflaub (1979: 244) sees the Persian King as "Tyrann par excellence," Georges (1994: 39) maintains that "tyranny was... a principal cultural marker of barbarism," while for Pelling (2002: 151-152) Herodotus' Persians had a conspicuous "commitment to tyranny."

I am countering this thesis by drawing attention to three problems: the distinctions between the vocabulary used to designate Persia and the Greek tyrants; the specific attributes of tyranny which do not conform to the attributes of the Persian monarchy; the perception of tyranny in 5th century Athenian discourse, which was not uniformly negative. Here I offer a brief summary of my arguments along with illustrative examples:

In terms of the vocabulary, the term τυραννίς should not be perceived as synonymous with μοναρχία. During Herodotus' Constitutional debate (3.80-82), for example, Darius never uses the word τυραννίς, choosing rather μοναρχία, which makes it hard to view this passage as an instance of the equation between Persia and tyranny, as Georges (1994: 39) does. Similarly, Aeschylus' *Persians* seem to be reproducing Persian court titles: for instance, δέσποτα δεσπότης (or δεσποτᾶν in some editions; *Pers.* 666) may reflect an Eastern honorific title for the Great King (cf. Richardson 1952: 60-62), who is never referred to as a "tyrant."

Furthermore, Greek depictions of tyrants conformed to stereotypes which are incompatible with the image of the Persian monarch. For instance, Thucydides (1.17) argues that the tyrants care only about themselves and their families, and are uninterested in expanding the state's territory, a description which stands in contrast to the ever-expanding Persian Empire.

Finally, the idea of tyranny in Athens did not necessarily have the negative connotation it has today. Building on an influential argument by Connor (1977), I offer evidence from tragedy and historiography that many Greeks may have seen tyranny as a good thing: to take just one example, in Euripides, characters as diverse as Polynices (*Phoen.* 506) and Hecuba (*Hec.* 1169) lament the loss of τυραννίς which they perceive as good. If tyranny indeed had a positive perception, no matter how limited, then its application to the Athenian arch-enemy and would-be conqueror becomes problematic.

In conclusion, this paper reevaluates an important scholarly debate on the perception of tyranny and Persia, topics providing context for much of the 5th century Athenian literature, and aims to lead to a better understanding of both by disentangling them from the unhelpful union in which they had been trapped.

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