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REVIEW DISCUSSION
Herodotus and the Sophists

KINGSLEY, K. Scarlett. 2024. *Herodotus and the Presocratics: Inquiry and Intellectual Culture in the Fifth Century BCE*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. £85.00. 9781009338547.

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With this volume K. Scarlett Kingsley makes a significant contribution not only for scholars of Herodotus, but also for all those engaged with the thought and literature of the fifth century. The 'Presocratic' category is, of course, at the centre of a lively debate today, especially since the publication of André Laks and Glenn Most's *Early Greek Philosophy*.[1] However, as Kingsley explicitly states, she uses the term 'by convention, ... for its ready familiarity', fully aware that terms such as 'pre-Platonic' or 'early Greek philosophers' might be preferable. She rightly interprets the category in the broadest sense possible, recognizing that Socrates does not represent a transitional figure (30–1). A key merit of Kingsley's work is her ability to break through the rigid boundaries imposed by literary genres, integrating Herodotus' *historiē* into a complex intellectual debate, drawing connections with theatre, medicine and, indeed, the philosophers included in Hermann Diels' canon.[2]

Particularly insightful is her analysis of the relationship between Herodotus' inquiry and the thought of the so-called sophists, especially Protagoras, whose role in the Panhellenic enterprise of the foundation of Thurii (80 A1 DK) – a *polis* of which Herodotus became a citizen – might have deserved mention. It is precisely the relationship Kingsley establishes between Herodotus and the sophists that I wish to focus on in this brief critical reflection on the volume. The discussion of the term *sophistēs* is meticulous (29–30): in the fifth century, it referred to figures beyond the narrow circle identified by Plato's dialogues, which – through the mediation of Philostratus' *Lives of the Sophists* – formed the basis of the canon found in Diels' *Vorsokratiker*.[3] The term was still devoid of a negative connotation in Herodotus, who, for instance, uses it to describe Solon (1.29; cf. pages 4–5). Kingsley's work is punctuated by apposite references to Protagoras, Gorgias, Prodicus, Hippias, Antiphon, Lycophron, as well as to the *Dissoi logoi* and the anonymous author preserved by Iamblichus, demonstrating both a personal engagement with the texts and a thorough exploration of the bibliography – including non-English scholarship, which is worth highlighting.

The focus on Protagoras is particularly strong in Chapter 2, 'Relativism, King of All' (38–91). The starting point is naturally the problem of *nomos*, which is central to Herodotus' reflections, particularly in the famous passage on Cambyses' mad impiety, with the 'thought experiment' that Kingsley defines as

[1] Laks and Most 2016.
[2] Diels and Kranz 1952.
[3] Cf. Noël 2002: 45–52.

the 'nomological marketplace' – 'if someone were to put a proposition before all men, ordering them to select the noblest *nomoi* for themselves from all *nomoi*, after examining them thoroughly each people would choose those of their own. So, each people observes that by far the noblest are their own *nomoi*' (Hdt. 3.38, Kingsley's translation, 49) – and the subsequent inquiry into *nomoi* conducted by Darius with the Greeks and the Callatians (48–55). In this context, Kingsley identifies a clear connection with Protagoras and his *homo-mensura* principle, interpreting it as an affirmation of 'a form of relativism compatible with human perception and judgment'. However, in the *Theaetetus*, Plato seems to attribute to Protagoras, on the one hand, 'a subjective relativism, whereby whatever an individual perceives is infallibly correct' and, on the other, a 'social relativism' (172a): 'as concerns public affairs, the noble and the shameful, the just and the unjust, the holy and the unholy, whatever each *polis* conceives and lays down as *nomima* for itself, these are also the truth in each *polis*' (Kingsley's translation, 41–3). And it is precisely this type of conception that underlies Herodotus' passage, which innovates upon Protagoras' position, though, by introducing the idea of tolerance as a 'metaethical response to cultural diversity' (51).

The problem of relativism among the sophists, and particularly Kingsley's interpretation of Protagoras, is revisited in an appendix specifically dedicated to the topic (211–16). This issue has long been central to scholarly debate, especially since Richard Bett's important 1989 article, which (in Kingsley's words) argues that, with the possible exception of Protagoras, no sophist attests to a form of 'strong relativism, as entailing that a statement is correct or incorrect relative to a given framework', but only 'a "weak" relativism', which is situational and compatible with an objective perspective: 'one might assert that it is objectively noble to help friends in their right minds and shameful if they are mad. This would then suggest an objective concept of justice underlies both positions' (211). Persuasively, Kingsley identifies a form of '"strong" relativism' in lines 499–502 of Euripides' *Phoenician Women*, which, as a very sharp analysis reveals, echo Protagoras' reflections – particularly on *orthoepeia* ('correctness of diction', though, contrary to what Kingsley argues, it is not certain that *Orthoepeia* is the title of one of Protagoras' lost works),[4] as well as on *antilogia* ('contradiction') and the 'man is the measure' thesis (212–13, cf. 47). Further traces of '"strong" relativism' may be found in the *Dissoi logoi* (e.g. § 2) and the *De morbo sacro* (14), making Protagoras' stance appear less isolated (213–15).

Kingsley also recognizes a significant parallel between Herodotus and Protagoras' *Peri theōn* (*On the Gods*), as Solon's emphasis on 'man's circumscribed temporality' (Hdt. 1.32) can be compared with fragment 80 B4 DK, where 'the brevity of life is an obstacle to knowledge' (2 n. 5). Further analogies between the incipit of *Peri theōn* and Herodotus could perhaps be noted, for instance, regarding the problem of knowledge of the gods' form (Hdt. 2.53).[5] A broader formal parallel with the preface of the *Histories* was identified by Mario Untersteiner in an unpublished work, *Fisica della storia erodotea*,[6] which in

[4] Cf. Corradi 2012: 164 n. 1.
[5] Cf. Corradi 2017: 460–1.
[6] Cf. Corradi 2024: esp. 124–5.

some ways anticipates certain lines of Kingsley's research. A possible connection between Herodotus and Protagoras is also suggested in Kingsley's reading of Themistocles' exhortation before the Battle of Salamis (Hdt. 8.83.1–2), where Herodotus presents an opposition between 'all of that which is stronger and that which is weaker', as determined by 'man's nature and condition', urging the Greeks 'to choose the stronger' (152). Kingsley plausibly connects this to Protagoras' art of antilogic and the opposition between worse and better argument attributed to him. Although she does not mention it, one might also note that Protagoras used the term *katastasis* ('condition') in the title of one of his works, *On the Original Condition* (sc. of humans) (Περὶ τῆς ἐν ἀρχῇ καταστάσεως, 80 B8b DK).

Regarding the necessity of transcending human nature, Kingsley aptly invokes Democritus (68 B3 DK), Gorgias' *Palamedes* (82 B11.15 DK) and the discussion in Plato's *Republic* 431a (155–6). One could also reference Plato's *Protagoras*, particularly the section on pleasure, where Untersteiner detected a possible allusion to Protagoras' opposition between the worse and better the argument (e.g. 353e, 357c).[7] Nonetheless, Kingsley's references to the *Protagoras* are well-placed. Regarding Themistocles' exhortation, she cites the dialogue's argument that courage is not exclusively determined by *physis* (*Prt.* 351a–b; 164 n. 73); concerning Cambyses' madness, she notes the 'rejection of justice as a symptom of madness' (*Prt.* 323a–b; 49 n. 48). However, it should be noted that, in the latter passage of the *Protagoras*, the true symptom of madness is not the rejection of justice but rather the admission of that rejection. One might also refer again to the *Protagoras* regarding the question of *nomos*, given the persistent wordplay on the verb *nemō* ('distribute') in the sophist's myth of Prometheus (cf. especially 320d–e, 322c), which Kingsley highlights in other contexts (38–9).

References to Gorgias are less frequent in the volume. Notably, however, Kingsley rightly connects Herodotus' proem to Gorgias' *Helen* (82 B11 § 5 DK) concerning the central role of *aitia* (24). *Palamedes* (§ 19) is mentioned (104) regarding the identification of *kerdos* ('profit') as a motive for human actions in relation to Darius' defence of falsehood (3.72.2–5), whose philosophical implications Kingsley convincingly brings to light (92–108). In this regard, the allusion to Antiphon is particularly fitting, especially his utilitarian conception of *dikaiosynē* ('justice') in *On Truth*. In this work, the sophist explicitly frames justice within the broader debate on the opposition between *nomos* and *physis* (102–3). Furthermore, Kingsley compellingly aligns Antiphon with Herodotus concerning the idea of a common *physis* shared by all humans (86 B44 DK F B col. II.10.33), which renders any distinction between Greeks and non-Greeks meaningless (138–9). Kingsley attributes a similar idea to Hippias, although the available evidence does not allow for definitive conclusions on this point (139 n. 83). Nevertheless, she rightly recalls Hippias in connection with Herodotus, highlighting parallels between the *Histories*' preface and fragment 86 B6 DK, where both authors display an interest in the non-Greek world and adopt 'greatness' as a principle for selecting material (22). After all, as Kingsley notes, Hippias appears in the sources

[7] Untersteiner 1996: 96–7.

as deeply engaged in historical research (22–3) and remarkably innovative in his approach to literary genres (26).

In Chapter 7, 'Herodotean Philosophy' (190–206), Kingsley's study of the relationship between the *Dissoi logoi* and Herodotus is particularly insightful. The anonymous treatise, which has undergone significant re-evaluation – including in the newly published annotated edition by Sebastiano Molinelli[8] – contrary to common assumptions, shows direct knowledge of Herodotus' text. Kingsley's meticulous analysis highlights a clear intertextual strategy:

> The treatise engages with select passages from the *Histories* on the cultural practices of foreigners and explores the persuasiveness of relativism by making a defense of and an attack on this philosophical position. But it is not simply the case that they are part of the same tradition; the *Dissoi Logoi*'s recurrent allusiveness acknowledges Herodotus' place within that tradition. (203)

By clearly situating Herodotus' thought within this broader intellectual tradition – especially through a thorough examination of the sophists – Kingsley's book stands out as a valuable resource for all those interested in this crucial phase of intellectual history and the development of literary genres.

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[8] Molinelli 2024.