

## REVIEW DISCUSSION

## Herodotus and the Lexicon of the Banquet

WUNDERL, Manuela. 2023. *Das Symposion bei Herodot.* Classica Monacensia, Münchener Studien zur Klassischen Philologie, Band 60. Tübingen: Narr Francke Attempto Verlag. €108.00. 9783381101115.

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Manuela Wunderl's *Das Symposion bei Herodot.* offers the first comprehensive study of sympotic (and banquet) scenes in Herodotus' *Histories*. From this perspective, the volume is a welcome addition both to the literature on the *symposion* – in which Herodotus' episodes have already found their place, but never as a specific subject of investigation<sup>1</sup> – and to Herodotean studies. Building upon prior scholarship on the Greek *symposion*, the book seeks not merely to catalogue Herodotus' banquet scenes, but to explain their narrative, cultural and interpretative significance within the broader architecture of the *Histories*. It succeeds in establishing a solid philological foundation, especially in the second lengthy chapter, which provides a detailed analysis of the conceptual and linguistic fields surrounding *xenia* ('hospitality'), *philia* ('friendship') and the nuanced Greek terminology for communal eating and drinking. Wunderl's treatment of Herodotus' vocabulary, notably her systematic discussion of expressions relating to meals, wine consumption and hospitality, will be a valuable resource for future scholarship. For example, those who wish to investigate the semantic nuances with which Herodotus uses meaningful terms such as *xenia* (and *xenos*, 'guest') or *hetairoi* ('companion') throughout the *Histories* will find it useful to consult their exhaustive catalogues (43–70 and 111–18, respectively). Similarly, the detailed examination of all occurrences of fundamental terms in Herodotus' convivial lexicon (for instance, συμπόσιον and συμπίνειν, συνουσίη ('company') and συνεστώ ('banquet'), δαίς ('feast, banquet') and δαίνυναι ('give a feast'), and many others) is also noteworthy, as it will facilitate comparisons both within and outside the *Histories*. In this sense, the book's principal strength seems to lie in the breadth and nuance of its textual analyses, which makes it a volume easier to 'use' than to 'read'.

Building on her thorough investigation, Wunderl attaches particular importance, as she herself states in advance (21), to the 'literary functions' of convivial scenes, seeking to interpret them in their narrative context. She therefore focuses – in Chapter 3 – on the episodes and passages where, in her view, Herodotus makes the sympotic setting narratively productive as a space for communication and of 'enhanced experience' ('intensiviertes Erleben', 155), as the title of the chapter affirms. According to her interpretation, the *symposion* serves three primary functions in the *Histories*: as a space for personal or politically

<sup>1</sup> Exceptions are the seminal articles of Coulet 1994 and Bowie 2003: both are duly discussed by Wunderl.

charged conversation, as a setting for counsel and deliberation, and as a frame for reflections on human vulnerability.<sup>2</sup>

A clear example of the first function is the meaningful reference to Darius' injunction that a servant remind him at every meal to 'remember the Athenians' (μέμνεο τῶν Ἀθηναίων, 5.105.2), a detail that subtly marks meals as recurrent occasions for political emotion in a 'private' setting. In the same direction, Wunderl's reading of Attaginos' banquet at Thebes (9.15–16), where the explicit transition from *deipnon* ('supper') to *symposion* generates the emotional space for a Persian guest's unusually candid monologue, is especially compelling.

The study also shows how banquets can mark political tension, as in the Macedonian *symposion*, where the overconfidence of the Persian envoys culminates in their murder (5.18–20). Moreover, Wunderl's discussion extends beyond literal *symposia* to include metaphorical feast imagery. In this sense, in addition to the banquet organized – through a collective effort by the city – by Thrasybulus of Miletus to show the Lydian king Alyattes the ineffectiveness of his attacks (1.22), Wunderl identifies a symbolic case of the equivalence between elaborate banquets and the well-being of the community in the episode described by Herodotus in 6.139.3–4 (244 n. 833). Faced with the Pelasgians' request that the Athenians pay compensation for their crimes, the latter prepared a sumptuous 'banquet scene' in the Prytaneion.<sup>3</sup> They then invited the Pelasgians in order to return their lands to them 'in the same prosperous condition (as the banquet table)': hence Wunderl's apt observation on the metaphorical value of the lavish banquet not only as equivalent to the wealth of the city, but also to its excellent organization. Finally, Wunderl devotes considerable space to a critical examination of cross-cultural banquets. Particularly noteworthy, not least for the depth of its treatment (197–215), is the case of the Getae and the Pythagorean-inflected *symposia* of Salmoxis (4.93–5), an account that is interpreted as evidence of Herodotus' skill in adapting sympotic motifs to explore mortality, belief and cultural identity.

Overall, Wunderl's choice of these categories provides a structure for analysing Herodotus' various banquet scenes, though at times the system risks constraining the multivalence of certain episodes, which can operate simultaneously on several levels. A few reservations should be added. On the one hand, the extensive cataloguing in Chapter 2 slows the argument's momentum: the section dedicated to vocabulary may not be easy to follow, but it is nonetheless an invaluable reference for anyone who seeks a comprehensive overview of Herodotus' terminology dedicated to *symposia* and banquets. On the other hand, the monograph's tight focus on Herodotus leaves limited room for comparative engagement with other authors (in different literary genres). More specifically,

<sup>2</sup> Wunderl's argument assumes that, alongside the specific terminology Herodotus uses throughout, even in his descriptions of banquets and feasts among non-Greek peoples, he also employs the mental categories associated with that terminology, namely those of the *symposion* as a typically Greek phenomenon. This assumption, which is open to debate, appears to be applied coherently throughout the book.

<sup>3</sup> In the analysis of sympotic furniture and the uncertain origins of the use of the *klinē* ('couch'), whether Eastern or not, the important volume by Baughan 2013 is missing, which highlights the link with the Eastern (Lydian) funeral custom of laying the dead on *klinai*.

the evidence on the *symposion* provided by key sources in the literature, such as Homer or Alcaeus, is discussed, but often separately and rarely enters into dialogue with Herodotus' account, except in the notes. The prevailing method of 'explaining Herodotus with Herodotus' makes it impossible, for example, to understand whether his reading of the 'sympotic culture' of non-Greek peoples should be considered specific or peculiar, or whether it should instead be placed within a broader, shared framework.

Finally, Wunderl's approach is generally very cautious, which can be seen as a strength rather than a limitation. In this regard, the discussion of ancient sources and modern opinions is mainly covered in the footnotes, of which there are 1,593 (perhaps it would have been better to restart the numbering for each chapter), and which are often very long. Overall, they appear to be a sort of 'safe space' for detailed insights, and in fact they are often very interesting and rich in suggestions. However, this aspect also makes reading very difficult at times, but these critical remarks do not diminish the achievement of the work.

In sum, *Das Symposion bei Herodot* is a useful contribution to Herodotean scholarship and to the cultural history of the *symposion*. Its combination of philological rigour and comprehensive engagement with the lexical indices of sympotic activity ensures that it will contribute to future research on commensality and feasting in ancient Greek culture.

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