
REVIEW DISCUSSION

The Sympotic Question in the *Histories*

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Adapted from a dissertation defended at Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität in 2022, Manuela Wunderl's book sets out to analyse *symposion* scenes in Herodotus' *Histories*, considering them within the overall context of the Herodotean narrative and taking into account the literary representation of each scene. As she explains (21), inspired in particular by the approaches of Corinne Coulet (1994) and Angus M. Bowie (2003), Wunderl intends to show the different ways in which the *symposion* scenes are integrated into the overall narrative, as well as their function and the effect they have within the *Histories*.

After an introduction (Chapter 1: 'Einführung') which presents the state of the art and the methodological approach adopted, Wunderl lays the foundations for her study by presenting an analysis of the practice and lexicon of hospitality and the *symposion* in ancient Greece (Chapter 2: 'Gastfreundschaft und *Symposion* – grundlegende Analysen'). The aim here is to underscore the foundational principles of these collective experiences, along with the terminology that expresses them, so that the convivial scenes in Herodotus' *Histories* can ultimately be considered within the context of these essential principles. With these foundations established, the *symposion* and banquet scenes in the *Histories* are examined in chapters 3 and 4.

These scenes are divided into two broad categories, within which the 'convivial' practices are analysed according to the different roles they can play in Herodotus' narrative. In the first category, banquets and *symposia* are investigated as places for speech and deliberation, but also for personal and intimate reflection on the finite nature of human life (Chapter 3: 'Symposion und Mahl als Orte für Kommunikation und intensiviertes Erleben'). In the second, Wunderl investigates the cases of banquets and *symposia* that function as devices illustrating the narrative and/or as devices that influence the unfolding of the narrative and set an action in motion (Chapter 4: 'Symposion und Mahl als Illustrationsmittel und Einflussfaktoren auf den Erzählverlauf').

In order to consolidate her findings as she proceeds, Wunderl provides a conclusion ('Fazit') at the end of each chapter and an interim conclusion ('Zwischenfazit') at the end of each sub-chapter. The study ends with a general conclusion (Chapter 5: 'Ergebnisse') which, without developing wider reflections or a critical view of the whole, is limited to reviewing and summarizing the findings acquired along the way, particularly focusing on those of the textual analyses in chapters 3 and 4.

I would like to offer two brief reflections on the book, the first concerning the subject of the study, the second concerning its conclusions.

THE SUBJECT OF STUDY AND THE MEANING OF THE TERM *SYMPOSION*

Despite the uniformity implied by the use of the term *symposion* in the title, the range of gatherings studied is not homogeneous, for it includes very different scenarios. The common denominator that would bring together and render the ensemble coherent may actually be the fact that all of these scenarios can be described as *symposia*, despite the Greek term συμπόσιον itself being found only once in Herodotus (in 2.7, referring to rich Egyptians' post-meal gatherings; cf. 119–20) and regardless of the specific terminology use in any given case – πότος and πόσις (occasions for communal drinking) and cognate verbal forms, but also συνουσία or συνεστώ (moments of gathering around a shared meal), or even simply δεῖπνον (a meal).¹ It is therefore important to clarify the complex meaning and scope that Wunderl attributes to the term *symposion*.

By assuming the dual bias of considering the fifth-century Greek *symposion* the 'ideal' and, consequently, the standard *symposion* against which the sympotic representations of Herodotus' *Histories* can be compared and judged (24–5; cf. 70–1),² Wunderl emphatically specifies in the Introduction that the term *symposion* is used not in reference to the entire 'standard' banquet (δεῖπνον and συμπόσιον), but only to the second part, when wine is passed around among the guests (21–2 n. 30).³ Nevertheless, Wunderl immediately proposes a broadening of the field of study which takes into account not only explicit *symposion* scenes, but also representations of meals offered to guests ('Gastmähler') and meals *tout court* ('Mähler'), the δεῖπνα,⁴ which represent *symposia* but without being explicitly represented as such (21).⁵

Wunderl reaffirms this 'proper' meaning attributed to the term *symposion*, indicating the second part of a banquet, in Chapter 2.2.1. Here, while once again clarifying this position and thereby distancing herself from modern historians who use the term *symposion* to designate the entire collective gathering,⁶ Wunderl

¹ On δεῖπνον see, e.g., Wunderl's brief remarks and references to the secondary literature (70–2)

² 'Denn das idealtypische griechische Symposion des beginnenden 5. Jh. v. Chr. soll als Maßstab angenommen werden, anhand dessen die dargestellten Vorgänge in den Symposiumsszenen in Herodots *Historien* beurteilt werden.'

³ 'Der Begriff des Symposions wird in der vorliegenden Untersuchung also nicht als Ausdruck für ein ganzes Gastmahl – bestehend aus Deipnon und Symposion – festgelegt, sondern für den zweiten Abschnitt eines Gastmahls, den des gemeinsamen Trinkens.'

⁴ However, the term δεῖπνον is not homogeneous either, since, as Wunderl points out, in the text of the *Histories* it can refer both to guest meals (banquets) with a *symposion* and to meals without guests not followed by a *symposion* and, more generally, to meals in ethnographic descriptions ('Als Deipnon kann der Text in Herodots *Historien* also sowohl einzelne Gastmähler mit Symposion bezeichnen als auch einmalige Mähler ohne anschließendem Symposion und generell Mahlzeiten in den ethnographischen Beschreibungen', 133).

⁵ 'Dabei sollen nicht nur eindeutige Symposiumsszenen, sondern auch Darstellungen von Gastmählern oder von sogenannten Deipna, Mählern, berücksichtigt werden, da Symposia auch Bestandteile von Gastmählern sein können, ohne explizit genannt zu werden.'

⁶ Only two bibliographical references are given on this point, including Klinghardt (1996), devoted not to the question of the banquet in Greek antiquity, but to the sociology and liturgy of the first Christian meals.

also broadens the scope she has just attributed to the very concept of *symposion*, going beyond cases of banqueting proper – in other words going beyond the institutional practice of *symposia*, and including ‘collective drinking’ in general (71).⁷ Wunderl therefore concludes that, in accordance with the literal meaning of the term, the decisive factor in defining a *symposion* is the participation of several people in a shared drink, so that one can speak of a ‘community of drinkers’ (71).

Finally, and to sum up, alongside the typical and explicit cases of *symposia*, two other cases are proposed for study: on the one hand, the simple *Gastmahl*, which does not explicitly involve the second properly sympotic element; and, on the other, meetings in which several people drink together independently of the fact that these meetings take place in the context of a banquet (cf. again 21–2, 70–2).

The three types of scenes referred to as *symposion* scenes (once again, regardless of the terminology used in Herodotus) are as follows:

- 1) Representations explicitly presented as *symposia*, that is, depicting several characters ‘drinking together’ following a communal meal. In analysing this kind of representation, the term *symposion* that Wunderl associates with it clearly refers to the well-attested and codified sympotic practice that characterizes a Greek banquet.
- 2) Representations of collective ‘banquets’ and ‘meals’ (‘Gastmähler’ and ‘Mähler’), which do not mention the second, sympotic element of sharing drink, but whose context and staging allow us to assume that it does indeed take place.
- 3) Representations of ‘collective drinking’ outside a specific convivial context. These cases are presented as a sort of internal sub-division of *symposia* proper. Here, the decisive element that allows these drinking parties to be designated as *symposia*, despite the absence of a convivial context, is simply the presence of several people drinking together; thus, the term *symposion* no longer relates to the, so to speak, institutional practice of the Greek banquet, but only the literal meaning, that of ‘drinking together’.

By shifting from a strictly institutional meaning, which clearly designates a codified practice, to a literal meaning, which designates simple gatherings of drinkers, and by including the hypothesis of an implicit presence in any ‘banquet of hospitality’ (what she calls *Gastmahl*, a term which, incidentally, has no real equivalent in Greek), Wunderl makes the term *symposion* a kind of all-purpose umbrella term, which sows a little confusion, since it can designate *symposia* within banquets, *symposia* without a banquet and banquets without explicit mention of *symposia*.

⁷ ‘Darüber hinaus wird der Begriff Symposium im Folgenden für Treffen verwendet, bei denen mehrere Personen miteinander trinken, unabhängig davon, ob dies im Rahmen eines Gastmahls geschieht oder in einem beliebigen anderen Kontext. Entscheidend dabei ist allerdings die Teilnahme mehrerer Personen, sodass von einer Trinkgemeinschaft gesprochen werden kann.’

THE FINDINGS

Despite these terminological shifts, Wunderl's study has the merit of bringing together the many representations of banquets, meals, moments of conviviality and real drinking parties evoked in the *Histories* and of providing an overview of them. This had been lacking in the panorama of Herodotean studies and constitutes, beyond Herodotus, a basis for future in-depth studies of the 'convivial question' in antiquity. Nevertheless, given this objective, explicitly stated in the Introduction (21),⁸ it is regrettable that there is no real index listing these same representations and making it easier to consult and check the text of the Herodotean passages concerned, beyond the general overview. The Index Locorum, which, together with the Index Nominum et Rerum, closes the volume, certainly presents all the Herodotean passages that are cited, but does not highlight the most important books and contexts, thus making it impossible to identify, in this long list of passages, the convivial scenes that are at the heart of the study and to situate them clearly in the *Histories*.

Returning to terminological issues, it is also regrettable that the 'ancient' uses of the vocabulary relating to the *symposion* are not explored in greater depth. It would have been worthwhile to take a closer look at the lexical choices made by the ancient authors who devoted entire texts to the institution of the banquet. I am thinking, in particular, of the first two authors of a 'literary banquet', Plato and Xenophon, who made very different terminological choices to designate their respective convivial gatherings. Plato never employs the term συμπόσιον to evoke the meeting at Agathon's house, but always the term συνουσία (cf. Pl. *Symp.* 172a, 173a, 176e, which Wunderl discusses on page 72); in contrast, Xenophon repeatedly uses συμπόσιον in clear reference to the meeting at Callias' house (cf. Xen. *Symp.* 6.5, 7.3, 7.5, 9.7).

In conclusion, a more general comment and one last regret. Although the aim of the volume is explicitly stated as being to provide an overview of the depictions of banquets and *symposia* in the *Histories* of Herodotus, it is a shame that Wunderl does not raise any real issues arising from this overview, limiting herself to producing a compilation of texts and analyses. It seems to me that the categories and themes with which she classifies the scenes are not sufficiently meaningful to create an overall understanding of Herodotus' position on the function of the *symposion*. The long enumeration of instances that forms this classification (reflected in the complex subdivision into chapters and sub-chapters) loses its effectiveness, in my judgement, if it is not interpreted as a whole. What is the link between these analyses? What conclusion can be drawn about the overall functioning of the *Histories*? What does all this tell us about Herodotus, both as an author and as a thinker, and about the ancient 'sympotic question', when we look at it in the wider context of ancient authors, before and after Herodotus? I am thinking not only of those authors who, like Herodotus, saw the banquet as one literary theme among others, notably Homer and the lyric and comic poets, but also, and even more so, those who saw the banquet as a theme for reflection and

⁸ 'Die vorliegende Arbeit soll dahereinen ganzheitlichen Überblick über die Gastmahl- und Symposionsdarstellungen in Herodots *Historien* bieten.'

literature in its own right: first, as I said, Plato and Xenophon, the founders of the sympotic literary genre, and then, of course, Athenaeus of Naucratis and Plutarch, who each in their own way questioned and developed this Platonic-branded literary genre in the Imperial era. The ‘Symposion-Literatur’ of the fourth century, the literary production centred on the banquet, which claimed to be a genre in its own right, is barely mentioned in the Introduction (13), with a reference to Stahl’s *Gesellschaft und Staat bei den Griechen* (2003), without any reference to the ancient authors themselves, or indeed to any specialist secondary literature on the subject. Surprisingly, there is also no reference to Athenaeus’ *Deipnosophists*, a fundamental work for those concerned with the ‘question’ of the Greek banquet, not only in view of Athenaeus’ reflections on ancient sympotic practice and literature, but above all in view of the great attention that he gives Greek historians and Herodotus in particular. Athenaeus himself is named just once, in the Introduction, alongside Plato and Xenophon, and very much in passing, in a reference to Marek Węcowski’s *The Rise of the Greek Aristocratic Banquet* (2014).

It is a pity to isolate an author so much on any given question; conversely, it is very useful (including for the advancement of collective research) to place ancient authors in a network, at least to situate them in relation to each other, especially regarding a question as crucial for our understanding of the functioning of a text and the thought of an author. Even if the aim of the book is not comparative, an opening, even brief, to the ancient sources – and the related scholarship – which feature a *symposion* and which, by this very choice, raise the question of how it functioned within a given community, could have contributed to the textual analysis of the passages studied and ultimately also to the development of a general, perhaps more thought-provoking, reflection on Herodotus’ text as a whole.

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