

BOOK REVIEW

Sophist Kings: Persians as Other in Herodotus. By VERNON L. PROVENCAL. London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015. Pp. ix + 330. Hardcover, \$114.00. ISBN 978-1-78093-613-0.

In this insightful and thought-provoking book, Provencal interprets Herodotus' political philosophy by placing him in the context of fifth-century intellectual currents, specifically, the sophistic movement. Previous scholars have noted several examples of sophistic argumentation in the *Histories* (such as the Persians' account of the origin of the Persian Wars [1.1-5]; Darius' attempt to persuade some Greeks and Indians to change their burial customs [3.38]; and the Constitutional Debate [3.80-82]) and there is a general agreement that Herodotus was familiar with the ideas and methods of the sophistic thinkers,¹ but Provencal is the first scholar to note that all the examples of sophistic argumentation in the *Histories* are placed in the mouths of Persians or their sympathizers (37). Thus, Provencal concludes, while Herodotus was certainly influenced by sophistic thinking, he was consciously positioning himself in opposition to the sophists and in dialogue with them (pages 1, 10, 26, 53 and *passim*).

In a thoughtful discussion of the sophistic movement (29–70), Provencal distinguishes between the sophists (who saw *nomos* as artificial and arbitrary, and thus opposed to *phusis*), and the more traditional Greek thinkers (including Homer, Hesiod, and Herodotus himself), who saw *nomos* as a cultural construct that was rooted in both divine and natural law. Provencal argues that Herodotus' view of *nomos* and *phusis* is similar to that of Heraclitus (DK22 B114), for whom “all human *nomoi* are nourished by the one divine *nomos*” (51–52). Thus, Provencal concludes, “when Herodotus says that Pindar is right in declaring *nomos* ‘king of all’ [3.38.4], it is not to say, as would Protagoras, that *nomos* is a human convention and customs are relative to one another, but, as Heraclitus would say, that human *nomoi* are relative to and dependent upon *nomos* as a universal and divine principle” (52).

¹ See especially Thomas, *Herodotus in Context* (2000: 126–27) and Raaflaub, “Philosophy, Science, Politics: Herodotus and the Intellectual Trends of his Time,” in Bakker, de Jong and van Wees, eds., *Brill's Companion to Herodotus* (2002: 160–61).

Building on this distinction between Herodotus and the sophists, Provençal analyzes “a key selection” of sophistic passages in the *Histories*, arguing that Herodotus consistently portrays the Persians as expressing sophistic views, while Herodotus himself maintains “traditional views of religion, law and government” (93). Provençal’s analysis of key sophistic passages in the *Histories* is the book’s greatest strength, and his conclusion, that Herodotus himself was not sympathetic to sophistic views, but was “in a dialogical relationship” with them (93), is quite convincing. But despite its value, this section of the book is incomplete because it discusses too few Herodotean passages to provide a sufficient basis for the rest of Provençal’s argument.

Provençal goes on to argue that, although it is clear from Persian inscriptions that the Persians were not in fact sophists (95–152), Herodotus portrays them as such because of the specific role that sophistic argument played in Herodotus’ own day. Because fifth-century Athenian intellectuals used sophistic arguments to justify Athenian imperialism—Provençal argues—Herodotus assumed that Persian intellectuals had justified their empire with similar arguments in the previous generation: “the ideological conflict between Panhellenism and Athenian imperialism in [Herodotus’] own time became representative of a universal paradigm by which he grasped and represented the past conflict between Greek freedom and Persian imperialism” (9).

This second part of Provençal’s argument is less convincing, partly because it is based on so few Herodotean passages. There are several sophistic arguments in the *Histories* (not mentioned by Provençal) that do not defend Persian imperialism. To give just two examples: Atys (1.39) argues that he should be allowed to go on a boar hunt despite his father’s warning dream that he was fated to be killed by an iron spear, which boars do not have (thus ‘making the weaker argument stronger’), and Artabanus (7.16) uses the latest Ionian scientific reasoning to argue that dreams are not divine, but are simply remnants of the day’s concerns. Both arguments are rationalizing and (wrongly, in Herodotus’ view) reject the notion of divine influence on human affairs, but neither of them defends Persian imperialism.

The second problem with Provençal’s argument is that not all sophistic arguments in late fifth-century Greece were used to support Athenian imperialism. Although Thucydides does have the Athenians defend their empire to the Melians with the sophistic claim that might makes right (5.105), he also has Brasidas use sophistic arguments in support of the Spartan cause (4.85–87). The strength of

sophistic arguments, it seems to me, is that they can be used to support any viewpoint, no matter how improbable (cf. Gorgias' *Encomium of Helen*). That is the point of Protagoras' claim to be able to "make the worse argument better" (Arist. *Rhet.* 1402a24).

So while I agree with Provençal that Herodotus consistently represents the Persians as making sophistic arguments which Herodotus himself does not endorse, I would suggest that Provençal's explanation of why he does this falls somewhat short. Yes, there are several passages in the *Histories* in which Persians justify their empire with sophistic argumentation, but there are other passages in which their sophistic arguments have a wider purview. But even though Provençal has not provided a complete explanation for Persian sophistry in the *Histories*, his book has greatly advanced our understanding of Herodotus' relationship to the sophistic movement, and for that we should all be grateful.

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