

HERODOTUS ON THE OLYMPICS: BIGNESS AND GREEKNESS

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Let us start not with Herodotus, but with the poet who comes up so often when sport and competition are in point, Pindar. Especially telling are the celebratory odes that he wrote for one chariot victor in particular, King Hieron of Syracuse and Etna: so we are dealing with a very big poet, who goes in for very big language, writing for a very big king. Not, of course, that Hieron would have been driving the chariot himself, sad to say: he funded it, bought the horses (not cheap) and employed the charioteer. It is more like talking of the race-horse owner – the Aga Khan or the Queen – winning the Derby, which always used to intrigue me when I was a child. (When my family first got a television I was very excited because I'd heard someone say that the Queen was likely to win the Derby four days after the Coronation: even as a five-year-old I knew that this was something I just had to see.)² This clearly mattered a great deal to Hieron (just as it doubtless did to the Queen). Horses and charioteers did not come cheap; Pindar certainly did not come cheap. It mattered specially much to Hieron, coming as he did from Sicily – certainly a part of the Greek world, but still somewhere near the fringes, with peoples not too far away in other parts of Sicily who weren't Greek at all. The Olympics were such a Greek thing, a great badge of Greek identity, with only Greeks allowed to compete, and Hieron cared

¹ This is the (mildly adapted) text of a lecture given at the 'Sport and competition in Greece and Rome' colloquium at the British Museum in June 2012. For those who prefer live performance, the lecture itself is available on the SPHS Youtube Channel at <http://youtu.be/QwALunQi0N4>. Olympic excitement was of course in the London air at the time.

² Four days after the Coronation in 1953 the Queen's horse, Aureole, came second in the Derby to Pinza, ridden by the newly knighted Sir Gordon Richards.

a lot about being Greek. Winning the Olympics and getting a Pindaric ode marks the same sort of Greek pride as Hieron showed when he dedicated a bronze helmet at Olympia to celebrate a military victory over the Etruscans (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Helmet dedicated by Hieron at Olympia to celebrate his victory at Cumae in 474 BCE. The inscription reads ‘Hieron son of Deinomenes and the Syracusans dedicate this to Zeus, from the Etruscan spoils at Cumae’. [Acknowledgement to British Museum.]

Pindar’s odes for Hieron are relevant too to the ‘Bigness’ as well as the ‘Greekness’ of my title. These poems seem particularly rich in *warnings*, in particular warnings about getting too big for comfort: almost literally, getting above oneself,

thinking oneself on a par with the gods. We have only to look at the myths that Pindar incorporated in these poems: *Olympian 1*, the story of Tantalus, who in this version offended the gods by taking away their nectar and ambrosia for a dinner-party of his own; *Pythian 1*, Typhos, buried under Etna for confronting Zeus; *Pythian 2*, Ixion, crucified for attempting to rape Hera. Of course Pindar is not *stupid*: he doesn't say, and you, Mighty Hieron, are in particular danger of going the same way: but there is still even more than usual of such remarks as:

One must not contend with a god,
 who at one time raises one group of men's fortune, then at other times
 gives great glory to others.

(*Pythian 2.87–8*, tr. Race)

Or summaries such as:

If the wardens of Olympus honoured any mortal
 man, then Tantalus was the one. He, however
 could not digest
 his great good fortune, and because of his greed he won
 an overwhelming punishment in the form of a massive
 rock which the Father suspended above him;
 in his constant eagerness to cast it away from his head
 he is banished from joy.

(*Olympian 1.54–8*)

What are we to make of that? One view is that 'Pindar seems to have thought him [Hiero] particularly in need of reminders not to overstep the mark';³ well, maybe, but it would be rather tactless of him to suggest as much. That is not the way to speak to a man of power, particularly if one wants to get the next commission as well. It is

³ S. Instone, *Pindar: Selected Odes* (Warminster, 1996), 105.

better to take it rather differently, and as a sort of compliment. You, Hieron, have achieved so much: so much as ruler of Syracuse, kind and gentle and measured as you are; so much as conqueror of those Etruscans; and now so much as Olympic or Pythian victor. *If anyone is going to get close to rivalling the gods, it is you.* So, again, if that sort of myth has relevance to any mortal today, it is going to be you. But, more than that, you are *so* wise and insightful that you know already where the boundaries are; you won't take this badly; this is the sort of wisdom that will chime with what you want to hear. You are big, big enough indeed to accept the knowledge of the limitations of that bigness.

Bigness, then, but not (if one is wise) too big; and Greekness, that badging of Greek identity. Those are the two things that will be central too to what Herodotus does with it: Herodotus, writing towards the end of the fifth century (normally we say about 425, but that is not at all certain); and writing about that great victory of Greece over the invading Persians some two generations before.

First, a story of the Olympic games of, probably, 504 or 500 BCE. Here it is another royal who wins, but this time in the running race, and so he actually breaks sweat himself. This is Prince Alexander of Macedon, the future king Alexander I.

Once when Alexander of Macedon decided to compete in the games and came down into the arena for that purpose, the Greeks who were drawn against him in the foot-race tried to bar him from taking part, on the grounds that barbarians [i.e. non-Greeks] were not allowed to compete in the games, which were exclusively for Greeks. However, Alexander demonstrated that he was actually an Argive and was therefore judged to be Greek; so he competed in the sprint and came equal first (συνεξέπιπτε τῷ πρώτῳ).

(Herodotus 5.22, tr. Waterfield)

Notice how visual it all is. Detail in Herodotus always tells, and this is a story that is there to live in the mind. Alexander has already ‘come down into the arena’ to compete: you can imagine the Greek competitors clustering round and ‘trying to bar’ him – that too is a very physical word. They are shutting him out, jostling and pushing him away, doubtless with some, as it were, very anglo-Saxon versions of Greek. Then he ‘showed’ or ‘demonstrated’ that he was descended from a family of Argos: doubtless not by waving any papyruswork (even if any such documents had existed Alexander was in sprinting rig, wearing perhaps a loincloth, perhaps nothing at all, and would have had nowhere to put it), but by making his points verbally. So we have to picture him making a little speech and the reluctant athletes agreeing to let him in. Then he ‘came out equal first’, which must mean a dead-heat; and that is quite a visual word too, literally ‘falling’ – capturing vigorous forward movement as he dips for the line – ‘out’ – passing the boundary of the marked-out track – ‘together with’ the other winner. A picture (Figure 2, showing something very similar in 2005) may be worth a thousand words; but Herodotus’ three words do an astounding amount.



Figure 2: Xiang Liu of China (left) crosses the finish line next to Terrence Trammell of the U.S. in the men's 110-metre hurdles race at the IAAF Grand Prix in Lausanne, July 5, 2005. [‘Reuters’]

Herodotus’ story does not come just anywhere. This is the point at which, after a lot of circling around, he is coming back to treat the preliminaries of the great war between East and West, between Persia and Greece. It is a good place to mark the importance, at least to Alexander, of being Greek. It also comes just after another story of this Alexander, dating from a few years later (5.17–20). Persian ambassadors have come to the court of his father King Amyntas to demand submission, and are not behaving well. They demand that women should be present after dinner, contrary to local custom: Amyntas reluctantly agrees, ‘seeing that you are our masters’. The women come in, and sit opposite: ‘make them come and sit over here’, say the Persians, and Amyntas again has to agree. Then the Persians start behaving very badly indeed. Young Alexander is present, and furious. He tells his father to go to bed, and leave things to him: ‘I’ll give the Persians what they’re asking for’. Father Amyntas is

suspicious: don't do anything silly, but yes, I'll go to bed. Then Alexander tells the Persians to hold on a moment while the women go and take a bath; then you can have sex with as many of them as you like. They go; and when they come back the Persians, evidently well gone by now, fail to notice that these are not the same women, indeed not women at all, but beardless young men. Each Greek pulls out his dagger and strikes, and thus ends a thoroughly disappointing evening for the Persians. Alexander had told them it was 'nearly bedtime', and that 'this man of Greece' would give them the honours they deserved (5.20); and he did. It's the big sleep.

It is a lovely story, and Herodotus tells it beautifully. It is also another good story to have here, as we are coming back to the showdown between Persia and Greece. It points forward to so much of what is to come. The Persians are going to come in, bullishly: the lack of respect for individual bodies, especially female bodies, prefigures the lack of respect for whole people's boundaries that is going to come.⁴ Nor is this the only place where the Persians just don't get it, don't understand what they're taking on. For the Greeks are not going to stand for it: and so Greekness is not just a matter of sleek young men competing at the Olympics, but these sleek young men doing something much riskier in defence of their local honour. Yet Alexander's father was not wrong: this is stupid, inviting all sorts of reprisals. And that too looks ahead. When Greek cities refuse to submit to the invading Persian might, Herodotus calls it, precisely, folly - ἀγνομοσύνη in the Greek, a failure to get one's thinking in order (6.10, 9.4.2). That is indeed what it was: folly. Glorious folly, admirable folly, the sort of pride in their freedom that made them distinctively Greek, but folly still, if one looked at it in any rational way.

⁴ On this connection of ideas see still C. Dewald, 'Women and culture in Herodotus' *Histories*', in H.P. Foley (ed.), *Reflections of Women in Antiquity* (1981), 91–125.

So far this can all be presented in a very celebratory, triumphalist way, even the folly part: it is great to be Greek, and if you have to have folly this is the best folly to have. And it is very moving. It's rather like a recent performance of Aeschylus' *Persians* in Epidavros, when the actor paused pointedly after the line 'the Greeks are called no man's subjects, no man's slaves' (242), and was rewarded by thunderous applause. But Herodotus has a neat way of stopping his own audience in their tracks whenever they might be tempted to become too proud of themselves and their Greekness. Reprisals do not in fact follow that act of Alexander's folly, and why? Because Alexander bribes the band of Persians sent to investigate; because he even gives his sister in marriage to one of those inquisitive Persians. That may be smart – Herodotus indeed characterises it as such, an act of 'wisdom', σοφίη, not folly at all (5.21.2) – but it is hardly glorious. And Alexander himself is not so admirable later in the narrative either. He is firmly on the Persian side when the crisis comes; he indeed is given a further big scene much later in the narrative (8.136–44), but there he is a Persian messenger-boy, urging the Athenians to come over to the Persian side. He gets a very uplifting Greek response telling him that he is wasting his time: 'As long as the sun follows the same path in the sky, we will never come to terms with Xerxes' (8.143.2). So this 'Greek badging' continues to be central to what he is doing: that, after all, was why he was selected for the mission, and a long digression at that point (8.137–9) gives more details of that Argive ancestry that was the basis for that Olympic claim back at 5.21. But he ends up by being a bit less Greek than those early signals suggested, and a bit too close for comfort to the Persians and to tyranny.

He is by no means alone. There are several Olympic winners who come to unfortunate ends, often because they too become too big, too close to tyranny or to being a tyrant. There are several of them later in Book 5, and so it is again noticeable

how much we get on these Olympic athletes as Greece is coming more firmly into view. There is Philippus of Croton, who joins up with the ill-fated Doreius who leaves Sparta in disgust when his half-brother Cleomenes becomes king, and both Doreius and Philippus come to a bad end, embroiled in a local dispute in Southern Italy (5.47). A little further on, we find a flashback to an earlier period at Athens, when an Olympic victor called Cylon ‘grew his hair long with an eye to tyranny’ – again very visual (5.71). He dies too, with messy consequences. And a book later we get Demaratus of Sparta, when again a quarrel with a brother drives a royal figure into exile, and he ends up accompanying Xerxes (6.70.3). On the Athenian side there is then Miltiades, from another family of Olympic victors, who again has the whiff of the tyrant about him – more than a whiff, in fact, as he does become tyrant, far away to the north in the Chersonese (6.103). These big men may indeed be too big for comfort, and Miltiades himself ends up on trial, and dying miserably, at Athens (6.136): but not before he has proved the saviour of Athens, the general who makes all the difference at the battle of Marathon (6.109–10). We are back with Pindaric themes, in fact: these great men are all the greater for their Olympic successes, but there is a danger that it can all turn sour; yet the really great know it, and can turn it all to be good, saviours of their people just as Hieron could be presented as his people’s saviour in Sicily.

There is another big Athenian family too that goes back to an Olympic victor, and that is the Alcmaeonids, the family of Cleisthenes, in many ways the founder of Athenian democracy. His grandfather was Cleisthenes of Sicyon – so another tyrant – an Olympic victor himself and grandson of a further victor. We are told how the marriage that produced the Athenian Cleisthenes came about. The Olympics are in the air. Cleisthenes of Sicyon had won the chariot race at the Olympics (6.126.2); he

issued an invitation for suitors for his daughter's hand to come sixty days later to his court, and a year-long competition would begin. We get a long list of the suitors: there are various oddities in the list, not least the places where suitors do *not* come from – none from nearby Corinth for instance, or Thebes, or anywhere in Asia Minor. In a brilliant article, Simon Hornblower relates this too to the Olympics, as the places that are mentioned, including a few in Italy, show a marked similarity to those that figure in the early Olympic victory-lists that we have.⁵ It is as if those Olympic games where the invitation was promulgated have toppled over to the wedding-competition. The year-long trials have something of that too, with running and wrestling and other tests in the gymnasium; eventually it comes to a banquet, which itself could echo the celebrations at the end of the Olympics, with singing and dancing (this may be where an initial victory ode was sung). The victor is about to be announced, and it is going to be a certain Hippocleides of Athens. But it was evidently one of those evenings which one enjoys rather too much, and it is the dancing that catches him out (6.129). He first does some Spartan steps, then some Athenian ones – a sort of parody of the Panhellenic qualities of the festival: then he finally stands on his head on the table, kicking his legs in the air. The prospective father-in-law is not at all amused: 'Hippocleides,' he says, 'you've danced away your marriage' – a phrase with a certain extra point in the Greek, as the word for 'dancing away', *ajporchvsao*, has in it a syllable *o{rc-* that suggests the Greek word for 'testicles', *o[rcei~*: 'you've ballsed up your marriage', as a recent scholar has put it.⁶ Hippocleides gleefully cries 'Hippocleides doesn't care!', and this became a proverb. Hippocleides probably cared a good deal more the next morning, but by then another Athenian had been

⁵ S. Hornblower, 'Agariste's suitors: an Olympic note', in A. Moreno and R. Thomas (eds.), *Patterns of the Past: Epitadeumata in the Greek Tradition* (Oxford, forthcoming).

⁶ D. Ogden, *The Crooked Kings of Ancient Greece* (London, 1997), 117.

proclaimed the victor, and this was the future father of Cleisthenes of Athens – and, Herodotus carefully goes on to point out, therefore also the ancestor of Pericles the Athenian. These big men, who can do so much for good or for ill, are certainly in the air, and they do seem to crop up particularly when the Olympics are in the air as well.

It is another good story, and maybe a little too visual for comfort if one remembers that Hippocleides probably wore no underpants; but again there may be just a little of another, more serious undertone. There is competitiveness here, just as in the games; there is going to be rather a lot of competitiveness when we get back to the more serious business of fighting Persia. Once again, that can be presented in a very rosy-eyed way. The Olympics come back into focus at one especially rosy time when, momentarily, we are positioned on the Persian side. Some deserters from Arcadia arrive.

The Persians brought them before the King, and asked them about the Greeks: what were they doing? ‘They are holding the Olympics,’ was the reply, ‘and watching the athletic and equestrian events’. ‘What is the prize that they are competing for?’ ‘For an olive crown’. At this Tritantaichmes said something very noble – and as a result Xerxes took him to be a coward –

so again we have a Persian who just does not understand.

When he was told that the prize was not financial but a crown, he could not stop himself saying in front of everyone: ‘Oh no, Mardonius! What sort of men have you led us to fight? They compete not about money but about excellence.’

(Herodotus 8.26)

This is again one of those marvellous, make-you-proud-to-be-a-Greek moments, and it is not wrong. We do see them contending for honour, and after each of the great battles Herodotus weighs up – and sometimes shows the contenders themselves weighing up – who has fought the best (7.226–7, 8.17, 8.123–4, 9.71–5). There is

even contention before battle, with a long argument between the Athenians and the Tegeans to decide who deserves the place of honour in the battleline at Plataea (9.26–7). But again Herodotus knows how to make his Greek readers pause before they get too complacent. ‘They compete not about money...’. Really? We see Greeks that are very concerned indeed with money, not least Themistocles himself, who pockets the lion’s share of a massive bribe during the campaign (8.4–5); and these ‘deserters’ are Greeks who have come looking for a job, presumably a fighting job – that is, basically, mercenaries. (Arcadia, their homeland, is indeed a familiar source of mercenaries.) Herodotus would not have been at all surprised to see British people in 2012 advertising their Olympic torches on e-bay; he might indeed have thought it ‘folly’ to do anything else. And even glorifying the Olympic spirit is not unrelieved. There is a heavy hint later that those who stayed away from the action were using the Olympics as an excuse (8.73.3).

Let me end by going back to that competitiveness. At those wedding games it turns sour, but ludicrously so. There are times when it is far more dangerous. As the invasion of 480 looms, the Greek thoughts turn to the west, to another powerful tyrant of Syracuse, Hieron’s predecessor Gelon. They call on him in the name of Greek unity to come to their help. Yes, he says, if I can be the leader. No way, cries the Spartan: unthinkable that a Spartan could be commanded by a mere Syracusan. All right, says Gelon: let me command the fleet. No way, cries the Athenian.... By now Gelon has had enough.

Gelon replied: ‘My Athenian friend, you seem to have leaders, but will have no-one for them to lead. Given that you make no concessions and want to keep everything for yourselves, you had better go home immediately and tell Greece that the spring has gone out of the year.’

(Herodotus 7.162)

‘The spring has gone out of the year.’ On the face of it that means only that the Greeks have failed to get the manpower and the ships and the supplies that they were hoping for. But it also suggests something else, something that Pericles meant some forty years after 480 when he used the same words in a funeral speech, perhaps for those who had died at Samos in 440–39. Pericles was referring to the young men he was commemorating who had died in battle; and Gelon’s words too suggest the deaths that will come as a result of this Greek parochial pride. Maybe, especially if Herodotus’ first readers and hearers remembered Pericles’ words too, they would catch the further hint of all the deaths that will come after the Persian Wars are over, when those fierce local loyalties will turn one Greek state against another. There are many more hints of that coming strife in the later books.

In many ways, this is just a version of a paradox of freedom that Herodotus explores elsewhere. Freedom inspires the Greeks: that is clear. They are no man’s subjects, no man’s slaves. But freedom also allows every individual contingent the possibility to walk away, to be out for themselves, just the way that competitive athletes are out for themselves (the ancient Olympics weren’t big on team-games): and many do, some for money, more because they simply see the folly of remaining. The good and the potentially disastrous aspects hang so very closely together. There was no inevitability about this triumph of freedom. It happens – but only just.