

СТАТЬИ / ARTICLES

THE WAR COUNCILS OF XERXES AND THE ORIGINS OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

OTTO LINDERBORG

Mid Sweden University

otto.linderborg@miun.se

ABSTRACT. This article presents an analysis of Xerxes' War Councils and their narrative context in Book VII of Herodotus' *Histories*. Set against the backdrop of the early 5th-century BC Persian court in Susa, these councils occur on the eve of Xerxes' campaign against Greece, framed by a foreboding dream in which an imposing figure instructs Xerxes to proceed with the march. Despite his earlier re-assessment of the councils, Xerxes ultimately follows the command of the dream-figure. Scholarly interpretations tend to link this decision to Herodotus' "tragic philosophy of history," suggesting that Xerxes was fated by the gods, or by divinely sanctioned custom, to undertake his hubristic campaign—resulting in inevitable divine retribution. This article re-explores the tension between the "metaphysical" explanation of Xerxes' decision presented in the dream narrative and the "secular" perspective offered in the councils. It argues that this tension can be reconciled by viewing Herodotus' conflicting accounts of Xerxes' march as a critique of political life in general. This interpretation reveals Herodotus' work as an early form of political philosophy.

KEYWORDS: Herodotus, Xerxes, Origins of Political Philosophy.

What arguably stands out most in Herodotus' account of Xerxes' War Councils is the blend of two conflicting representations: the god-king and the power of λόγος.¹

¹ For the four speeches comprising the war councils—two by Xerxes and one each by Artabanus and Mardonius—see Hdt. 7.8–11. Artabanus, being Darius' brother, occupied a unique position as Xerxes' uncle. Mardonius, again, had a notable history of high command under Darius. Herodotus famously depicts Mardonius as instrumental in establishing democracies in Ionian city-states conquered by the Persians: Hdt. 6.43. Later in the

The divine pretense of Xerxes is vividly illustrated in the famous episode where he has the Hellespont whipped with 300 lashes for the destruction of his bridge.² This striking moment emphasizes Xerxes' assertion of exclusive power, not only over his fellow men and subjects but also over nature itself. In truth, he seems to perceive himself as an all-powerful deity that is incapable of tolerating any aspect of the natural world not submitting to his will.³

However, just before embarking across the sea, a curious juxtaposition follows when he prays to the sun and makes offerings to the Hellespont—as if he has suddenly recalled the existence of other gods:

[He prayed] to the sun that no accident might befall him which would keep him from subduing Europe before he reached its farthest borders (εὐχετο πρὸς τὸν ἥλιον μηδεμίαν οἱ συντυχίην τοιαύτην γενέσθαι, ἣ μιν παύσει καταστρέψασθαι τὴν Εὐρώπην πρότερον ἢ ἐπὶ τέρμασι τοῖσι ἐκείνης γένηται) [...] [repenting] having whipped the Hellespont and gave gifts to the sea as atonement (μετεμέλησέ οἱ τὸν Ἑλλήσποντον μαστιγώσαντι καὶ ἀντὶ τούτων τὴν θάλασσαν ἐδωρέετο).⁴

Equally striking is the portrayal of the power vested in λόγος, particularly as Xerxes prepares to reveal his decision to attack Greece. In a curious contrast to his otherwise tyrannical manners, he declares: “so that I not seem to you to have my own way, I lay the matter before you all” (ἵνα δὲ μὴ ἰδιοβουλεύειν ὑμῖν δοκέω, τίθημι τὸ πρῆγμα ἐς μέσον).⁵ It is his intention to avoid appearing authoritarian that prompts him to place the matter “in the middle” (ἐς μέσον) for discussion, thereby inviting input from his counselors. However, this language of openness sits uneasily alongside his earlier proclamations of divine right and command, where he insists that “no land that the sun beholds will border ours, but I will make all into one country, when I have passed over the whole of Europe” (οὐ γὰρ δὴ χώρην γε οὐδεμίαν

Herodotean narrative, Mardonius' character becomes particularly prominent in the aftermath of Xerxes' defeat at Salamis and at Plataea: Hdt. 8.100; 9.41.

² Hdt. 7.35.

³ Although, as Anca Dan has suggested, at this point in the narrative it may be more accurate to describe not an unrestrained fury that overwhelmed the Persian ruler, but rather his performance of a ritual to tame the demons of the borders while crossing the Hellespont—the boundary between Europe and Asia: see Dan 2015, 191–235. Conversely, however, in the Herodotean narrative, the crossing of borders, whether by land or sea, often alludes to the hubris of an aggressor: see Sinitsyn 2019, 106.

⁴ Hdt. 7.54.2–3. For longer citations from the *Histories*, I use the translation of A.D. Godley.

⁵ Hdt. 7.8d.2.

κατόψεται ἥλιος ὅμουρον ἐοῦσαν τῇ ἡμετέρῃ, ἀλλὰ σφέας πάσας ἐγὼ ἅμα ὑμῖν χώραν θήσω, διὰ πάσης διεξελθὼν τῆς Εὐρώπης).⁶

In Herodotus' narrative, Xerxes thus represents a complex symbol of power, as he struggles between the desire for divine authority and the challenges of leadership and governance. A pertinent question for the modern reader is why Herodotus as the narrator chose to juxtapose these contrasting representations in this specific manner? I will argue that the Herodotean narrative presents an early form of political philosophy—specifically, a profound social critique aimed at highlighting deep-seated issues within the political sphere. This critique, I contend, goes beyond a mere historical reconstruction of allegiances at the Persian court and the subsequent ramifications in the conflict between Greece and Persia. Instead, the narrative suggests the potential for transforming politics to prevent such destructive oppositions from emerging. The conceptual assumption regarding the emergence of political philosophy that will be articulated in this article thus posits that political philosophy relies on the capacity to envision social ideals that transcend the existing political order. More specifically, this investigation assumes that *political philosophy entails the ability to conceive of socially transformative visions that are not sanctioned by divine authority*.⁷

To establish a foundation for understanding the Herodotean contribution to the emergence of this transformative perspective, the article will commence with an overview of the argumentative content and the initial outcome of the War Councils. Subsequently, it will examine the impact of the dream visions, emphasizing how these supernatural elements influenced the debate and ultimately shaped Xerxes' final decision. Next, there will be an exploration of the dominant scholarly interpretations, particularly the prevailing "tragic" perspective, which implies a sense of predestination in Xerxes' march—whether through divine ordinance or the weight of tradition. However, an alternative viewpoint will then be introduced that emphasizes the inherent tension between the two differing accounts that led to Xerxes' choice: the "secular" perspective represented by the councils and the "metaphysical" interpretation encapsulated in the dream narratives. It is by further elaborating on this tension, as well as by presenting a critical comparison with similar understandings of the origins of political philosophy found in previous scholarship, that this article aims to clarify the political-philosophical dimensions of Xerxes' War Councils.

⁶ See Hdt. 7.8c.2. Cf. Barker 2009, 176–177; Grethlein 2009, 198.

⁷ Cf. Linderborg 2018, 35–37.

The councils and the dreams

In the speech that opens the councils, Mardonius is portrayed as expressing his loyalty to Xerxes' earlier judgment, which asserted that Xerxes should carry out his father Darius' intentions to subdue the Greeks alongside the rest of Europe.⁸ In this context, Mardonius produces what may appear to the modern reader as a notably distorted appeal for moral consistency:

Master, you surpass not only all Persians that have been but also all that shall be; besides having dealt excellently and truly with all other matters, you will not suffer the Ionians who dwell in Europe to laugh at us, which they have no right to do (ὦ δέσποτα, οὐ μόνον εἰς τῶν γενομένων Περσέων ἄριστος, ἀλλὰ καὶ τῶν ἐσομένων, ὅς τά τε ἄλλα λέγων ἐπὶ κεο ἄριστα καὶ ἀληθέστατα, καὶ Ἴωνας τοὺς ἐν τῇ Εὐρώπῃ κατοικημένους οὐκ ἑάσεις καταγελάσαι ἡμῖν ἐόντας ἀναξίους). It would be strange indeed if we who have subdued and made slaves of Sacae and Indians and Ethiopians and Assyrians and many other great nations, for no wrong done to the Persians but of mere desire to add to our power, will not take vengeance on the Greeks for unprovoked wrongs (καὶ γὰρ δεινὸν ἂν εἴη πρήγμα, εἰ Σάκας μὲν καὶ Ἰνδοὺς καὶ Αἰθιοπὰς τε καὶ Ἀσσυρίους ἄλλα τε ἔθνηα πολλὰ καὶ μεγάλα ἀδικήσαντα Πέρσας οὐδέν, ἀλλὰ δύνανται προσκτᾶσθαι βουλόμενοι, καταστρεψάμενοι δούλους ἔχομεν, Ἑλληνας δὲ ὑπάρξαντας ἀδικίης οὐ τιμωρησόμεθα).⁹

In this passage, Mardonius presents an argument that exemplifies a form of self-referential 'internal critique'—that is, an argument that, in relation to the criticizing subject itself, underscores an inconsistency between a normative principle and a specific normative view. In the specific type of internal critique employed by Mardonius, an implicit normative principle is revealed to be at odds with an explicit normative view.¹⁰ The principle in question pertains to the Persian approach of conquering and enslaving without retaliation. The explicit view, in turn, arises from the Persians' reluctance to take up arms against the Greeks. How can it be justified that the Persians refrain from conquering the Greeks in retaliation, when they have subdued so many other innocent peoples? This encapsulates the essence of the internal critique employed by Mardonius, which disregards the possibility of abstaining from conquest altogether.

Indeed, Mardonius seeks to ground his endorsement of Xerxes' position solely on the validity of the king's λόγος, or his reasoned arguments. What Mardonius

⁸ Hdt. 7.8c–d.

⁹ Hdt. 7.9.

¹⁰ Cf. J. Tralau 2012, 46–48.

tries to achieve, then, is to reinforce the strength of Xerxes' arguments by drawing them to their logical conclusion.¹¹

After Mardonius, Artabanus enters the scene with the intention of doing what likely no one else would dare to in the presence of the king—namely, “pointing out an opposing thought” (γνώμην ἀποδείκνυσθαι ἀντίτην τῇ προκειμένῃ).¹² In fact, Artabanus, too, begins his argument with an implicit appeal for the overriding power of λόγος, asserting that sound judgment is impossible when there is no opportunity to choose between conflicting arguments.¹³ He then reveals himself to fulfill a very specific functional role in the overall Herodotean narrative: that of a “wise adviser” of a purely dissuasive nature (*Warner*).¹⁴

The primary argument he employs against the expedition is rooted in his own experience: it would be futile to attack the Greeks, who are far more powerful than the Scythians, who also managed to defeat the Persians—something Artabanus himself was compelled to witness during the reign of Darius:

Now I advised Darius, your father and my brother, not to lead his army against the Scythians, who have no cities anywhere to dwell in (ἐγὼ δὲ καὶ πατρὶ τῷ σῷ, ἀδελφεῷ δὲ ἐμῷ Δαρείῳ ἡγόρευον μὴ στρατεύεσθαι ἐπὶ Σκύθας, ἄνδρας οὐδαμόθι γῆς ἄστὺ νέμοντας). But he hoped to subdue the nomadic Scythians and would not obey me; he went on the expedition and returned after losing many gallant men from his army (ὁ δὲ ἐλπίζων Σκύθας τοὺς νομάδας καταστρέψεσθαι ἐμοί τε οὐκ ἐπέιθετο, στρατευσάμενός τε πολλοὺς καὶ ἀγαθοὺς τῆς στρατιῆς ἀποβαλὼν ἀπῆλθε). You, O king, are proposing to lead your armies against far better men than the Scythians—men who are said to be excellent warriors by sea and land (σὺ δὲ ὦ βασιλεῦ μέλλεις ἐπ' ἄνδρας στρατεύεσθαι πολλὸν ἀμείνονας ἢ Σκύθας, οἳ κατὰ θάλασσαν τε ἀριστοὶ καὶ κατὰ

¹¹ Cf. Hdt. 7.10.1, where Mardonius is described as “having made Xerxes' argument plausible” (ἐπιλεήνας τὴν Ξέρξεω γνώμην).

¹² Hdt. 7.10.1. Here, Artabanus' daring is not a matter of foolishness, since he was both the king's uncle and entrusted to him (Ἀρτάβανος ὁ Ὑστάσπεος, πάτρως ἐὼν Ξέρξη, τῷ δὲ καὶ πῖσυνος ἐὼν). However, it will show that not even Artabanus can safely challenge the king, as Xerxes' swift and furious response is to command his removal from the campaign and his confinement at home with women: see Hdt. 7.11.1. Cf. S. Sheehan 2018, 200.

¹³ Hdt. 7.10A.1. This is “the most formal articulation of the benefit of antilogy” to be found in the Herodotean narrative: see E. Barker (2009) 181.

¹⁴ See Lattimore 1939, 24: “There are, in the main, two kinds of wise adviser [in Herodotus]. Of these, the more familiar may be called, for convenience, the tragic warner [...] This type of adviser, then, is the sage elder who tries to halt the headstrong action in a chief; he is in general pessimistic, negative, unheeded, and right.” Cf. Bischoff 1932. Specific to Artabanus' function as an advisor, however, is that he is a *Warner* who changes his mind: see Tuplin 2022, 349.

γῆν λέγονται εἶναι). It is right that I should show you what danger there is in this (τὸ δὲ αὐτοῖσι ἔνεστι δεινόν, ἐμὲ σοὶ δίκαιον ἐστὶ φράζειν).¹⁵

However, much like Darius before him, Xerxes disregards the warning from Artabanus—asserting instead that “in this enmity there is no middle ground” (τὸ γὰρ μέσον οὐδὲν τῆς ἔχθρης ἐστί). Xerxes thus argues that either the Greeks will strike against the Persians, or the Persians will launch an assault on the Greeks, and ultimately, one side will surrender to the other. Hence, his sentiment is that there is no avoiding the war.¹⁶ Yet that same night, Xerxes’ conviction in this necessity wavers, leading him to conclude that Artabanus is correct.¹⁷

However, he is soon swayed once more, this time by a recurring nightly vision of an imposing and menacing figure that both encourages and threatens Xerxes to proceed with his planned campaign. After its initial appearance, Xerxes pays no heed to the dream figure, but when it reappears the following night, he feels compelled to follow its instructions. After donning the king’s attire and resting in his bed, the same vision magically compels Artabanus to embrace the decision as well—despite having previously been the only member of Xerxes’ betrothed group to dare to challenge the planned invasion and being firmly convinced that the dream figure was not of divine origin (οὐδὲ ταῦτα ἐστὶ [...] θεῖα).¹⁸

Thus the final impetus for the decision to march against Greece, as suggested at this juncture in Herodotus’ narrative, does not lie in the authority of speech or in the divine power of Xerxes.¹⁹ Instead, the ultimate authority emerges from a divine figure encountered in a nocturnal vision. This inspires Artabanus to offer the following reinterpretation of Xerxes’ boldness:

I judged that you had only to remain in peace for all men to deem you fortunate (γνώμην εἶχον ἀτρεμίζοντά σε μακαριστὸν εἶναι πρὸς πάντων ἀνθρώπων). But since there is some divine motivation, and it seems that the gods mark Hellas for destruction, I myself change and correct my judgment (ἐπεὶ δὲ δαιμονίη τις γίνεται ὁρμή, καὶ Ἕλληνας, ὥς οἶκε, φθορὴ τις καταλαμβάνει θεήλατος, ἐγὼ μὲν καὶ αὐτὸς τράπομαι καὶ τὴν γνώμην μετατίθεμαι). Now declare the gods’ message to the Persians, and bid

¹⁵ Hdt. 7.10a.2–3.

¹⁶ Hdt. 7.11.

¹⁷ Hdt. 7.12.1.

¹⁸ Hdt. 7.12–18. For Xerxes’ two *Schicksalsträume* regarding the “large and well-built man” (ἄνδρα μέγαν τε καὶ εὐειδέα), encouraging and pressuring Xerxes to proceed with his planned campaign against Greece, see Hdt. 7.12–14. For Artabanus’ corresponding dream, see Hdt. 7.17.1–18.1. Cf. Frisch 1968, 11–15.

¹⁹ For a discussion of Xerxes’ limited *auctoritas* compared to his complete *potestas* in relation to his Persian interlocutors, see Zali 2015, 77–78.

them obey your first command for all due preparation (σὺ δὲ σήμνηνον μὲν Πέρσῃσι τὰ ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ πεμπόμενα, χρᾶσθαι δὲ κέλευε τοῖσι ἐκ σέο πρώτοισι προειρημένοισι ἐς τὴν παρασκευήν). Do this, so that nothing on your part be lacking to the fulfillment of the gods' commission (ποίηε δὲ οὕτω ὅπως τοῦ θεοῦ παραδιδόντος τῶν σῶν ἐνδεήσει μὴδέν).²⁰

In this way, Herodotus portrays Artabanus as shifting all responsibility for the impending war to a realm beyond human control: the concept of a divine mandate (δαιμονική ὁρμή θεήλατος) is what ultimately compelled Xerxes on his march.

Herodotus' identification of this as the fundamental cause of the campaign is a claim that has been supported by some of the most prominent voices in modern scholarship.²¹ More recently, the structural necessity implied by the divine dream scene has been reaffirmed by Christopher J. Tuplin through an analysis of the commonly accepted intertextuality between Xerxes' dreams and that of Agamemnon in the *Iliad*. In Book 2, Zeus sends Agamemnon a deceptive dream, appearing as the wise Nestor, promising swift victory over Troy if he launches a full-scale assault. In Xerxes' dreams, the clear and authoritative (albeit false) prophecy of success is absent, yet the divine necessity to attack is emphasized just as strongly as in the *Iliad*.²²

All the same, can we really be certain that Herodotus genuinely believed, or intended for his audience to view, Xerxes as a man divinely chosen to be a recipient of immortal deception and tragically destined to march against Greece? Or might it be that the ultimate purpose for his presenting these episodes in this manner served some other aim?

The tragic interpretations

More recently, the tragic interpretation of Herodotus' historical understanding has been defended by Jonas Grethlein:

Besides divine envy that seems to underlie the apparition that appeared to Xerxes, divine retribution and the cycle of good and bad fate are competing models that conceptualize dramatic changes in the Histories [...] In the end, as the dreams of Xerxes reveal, human beings are at the mercy of the gods.²³

²⁰ Hdt. 7.18.3.

²¹ See Jacoby 1913, 445–446, who argued that Herodotus had managed to gather “*ganz vorzügliche Nachrichten*” about the events occurring at the Persian court. Cf. Hdt. 7.12.1.

²² Tuplin 2022, 349–350. Cf. Barker 2022, 180–181.

²³ See Grethlein 2009, 203–205. Cf. Pohlenz 1937, 125.

It is, in fact, not incorrect to suggest that a sort of tragic view of history may be perceived in Herodotus' work,²⁴ particularly in the general conception that human happiness and success are ephemeral. In another section of the *Histories*, this conception is explicitly conveyed through the famous vision of the cyclical nature of human destiny, expressed by Croesus after his downfall:

I must first teach you this: men's fortunes are on a wheel, which in its turning does not allow the same man to prosper forever (ἐκεῖνο πρῶτον μάθε, ὡς κύκλος τῶν ἀνθρωπίνων ἐστὶ πρηγμάτων, περιφερόμενος δὲ οὐκ ἔῃ αἰεὶ τοὺς αὐτοὺς εὐτυχεῖν).²⁵

Nevertheless, the Herodotean resolution of the conflict between reasoned argument and absolute might could be interpreted in a different light. This interpretation would stress the tension between the "secularism" and the "metaphysical" elements inherent in the juxtaposition of the council scene and the dream sequences.²⁶

The tension between the secular nature of the decision facing Xerxes and its metaphysical resolution was first highlighted by Friedrich Solmsen in one of his final contributions to the field of Classical philology. Solmsen noted that the predominantly secular version depicted in the council scene is indeed reinforced by the subsequent narrative—specifically at the point when Artabanus and Xerxes reconsider the decision to proceed with the march after the campaign against Greece has already begun. However, at this juncture, they abruptly overlook the supposed divine intervention of the dream.²⁷

Before turning to a reexamination of the interpretive model introduced by Solmsen, we should look, however, at another possible way of resolving the narrative tension inherent in the War Councils.

²⁴ Cf. Roy 2010, 134; Jong 2014, 190; Sheehan 2018, 200–201.

²⁵ Hdt. 1.207.2.

²⁶ The most straightforward solution to the tension created through juxtaposition of the council and the dream scenes would be to discredit one or the other of these sequences. Exactly this approach was in fact proposed by B. E. McNellen, who suggested that Herodotus himself likely never accepted the dream stories but may have viewed them as a Persian attempt to "save face"—by portraying their king as wise enough to listen to Artabanus yet unable to follow his advice: see McNellen 1994, 306. This proposition cannot be entirely dismissed, since Herodotus indeed professed to λέγειν τὰ λεγόμενα ("tell that which has been told") rather than to believe everything he heard: see Hdt. 7.152.3. However, in this paper, I aim to interpret the dream scene as an integrated and meaningful part of the overall Herodotean narrative.

²⁷ Solmsen 1974, 157–159. Cf. Hdt. 7.47.

What should we make, then, of the fact that Herodotus chooses to resolve the clash and fusion of the two opposing representations: on one hand, the λόγος of the free city-state (ruled solely by ‘master custom’ (δεσπότης νόμος)),²⁸ and on the other, the ultimate power of the god-king (the tyrant whose power claims extend to the point of being immune to ὕβρις) within the context of a dream? One way to approach this question, without resorting to a Herodotean vision of divine ordain, is to turn to the arguments presented in the War Councils that precede the tale of Xerxes and Artabanus’ ominous dreams.

Here, the first argument of Xerxes also resonates particularly strongly with the reader, since it is echoed—as we have seen—by Mardonius, who employs internal critique to defend his master’s position. This argument revolves around Persian custom, or νόμος, here portrayed as the historically approved and divinely sanctioned path of the Persians. According to Xerxes, supported by Mardonius, this path involves a relentless pursuit of conquest and subjugation, and a continuous striving to expand the empire’s dominion.²⁹ Thus, the implication is that Xerxes’ dream and his own mode of thinking and reasoning are conveying the same message:

To return to the dream of Xerxes: the dream is telling Xerxes the truth [...] Xerxes is a kind of tragic figure, but what drives him into an act of hybris is not his fate, but the *nomoi* of Persia, which he cannot abandon without changing the nature of his empire and endangering his own position.³⁰

As far as it suggests a likely historical substrate in the Persian quest for greater imperial dominion, this attempt to resolve the challenges stemming from the apparent conflict in the narrative is well-founded.³¹ However, I prefer to examine the Herodotean tension between argument and religiously sanctioned authority from a different perspective. I argue that through his distinct and nuanced accounts of the factors influencing Xerxes’ ultimately disastrous campaign against Greece, Herodotus is engaging in what can rightly be termed political philosophy.

²⁸ For the concept of δεσπότης νόμος, see Hdt. 7.104. Cf. Winton 2005, 106.

²⁹ Cf. Hdt. 7.8a1–2.

³⁰ Evans 1961, 111. More recently, Evan’s point of view has been reiterated by Scott Scullion who likewise conceives of Xerxes’ dream as an “apotheosis of the Persian *nomos* of imperial expansion”: see Scullion 2006, 197. Cf. Sheehan 2018, 200–201.

³¹ For additional discussion on the potential historical substrates in the narrative that provides background to Xerxes’ decision, see Köhnken 1988, 37–38.

Herodotus and political philosophy

What happens with the sudden nightly visions of Xerxes and Artabanus, I argue, is that the conflicting claims of the *μόναρχος* and *λόγος* dissolve and dissipate. This results in an acknowledgment of the necessity for a standard that surpasses both the authority of argument and supernatural power—whether it be the divine power governing even the king, or the equally formidable force of tradition and law in any form: the *νόμος* that Herodotus, quoting Pindar, famously described as “king of all.”³² In other words, the interpretation I propose is one that acknowledges a Herodotean recognition of generally binding law or custom functioning as a universal authority over society and human relations overall,³³ while also recognizing the need for the political community to distance itself from this kind of authority and to acknowledge diverging principles when such distancing becomes necessary.³⁴ The tension between “metaphysics” and “secularism” in the narrative is thus obliterated at the moment when the *Histories* delves into a critique of politics and political life in general.

Such a critique, I assert, is exactly what the audience is encouraged to engage in as the narrative embellishes the religiously sanctioned authority of *νόμος*, through which the power of *λόγος* can be thoroughly discredited, in a grotesque manner—yet still endows it with the ability to challenge what has been established through reasoned argument.³⁵ In reality, what Herodotus accomplishes is inviting his Greek audience to engage in a debate that appears to unfold at the Persian court but is, in fact, also rooted in the specific and tangible political life of their own:

the possibility of dissent in the Persian court is raised only to be silenced. Yet, the debate does work: Artabanus’ carefully framed dissent makes Xerxes think again

³² Cf. Hdt. 3.38.4: “it is, I think, rightly said in Pindar’s poem that custom is lord of all” (ὁρθῶς μοι δοκεῖ Πίνδαρος ποιῆσαι νόμον πάντων βασιλέα φήσας εἶναι).

³³ For references to the scholarly debate regarding Herodotus’ interpretation of *νόμος*—whether it refers exclusively to the specific customs of particular peoples or also encompasses a more general law of nature and society—see Grintser 2018, 172.

³⁴ This is not to say that, when uncalled for, distancing oneself from the dictates of custom and law cannot also be extremely harmful to both individuals and society. In fact, such actions can serve as a prime example of immorality, as illustrated in the Herodotean narrative through the example of the Persian king Cambyses’ total disregard for *νόμος*: see Kingsley 2018, 47.

³⁵ For the most grotesque manifestation of the power of Persian customs and laws in the Herodotean narrative, see Hdt. 7.18.1, where Xerxes’ dream-vision appears to Artabanus, threatening “to burn his eyes with hot gleaming iron” (θερμοῖσι σιδηροῖσι ἐκκαίειν αὐτοῦ μέλλειν τοὺς ὀφθαλμούς).

and reach a judgment that is more favourable to all [...] Moreover, it is a decision by which Xerxes stands; it takes the intervention of the dream-vision to get the move to war back on track.³⁶

But how effective is a debate truly if, at any moment, an appeal to tradition or the divine can undermine its outcome? Is it not the case, rather, that for a discussion on political matters to be genuinely impactful, the opposite order must first be established—that is, the examination of political issues should take precedence over any external considerations beyond the human community? And by extension, is it not essential for political philosophy to recognize visions of such transcendence? Indeed, is this not the very presupposition regarding the possibility of authentic political thought and philosophy that Herodotus' narrative seems to expose?

Similar to, yet contrasting with, the understanding of the presuppositions for genuine political philosophy outlined above, is Jean-Pierre Vernant's perspective on the origins of political philosophy. In the work of Vernant, the beginnings of political philosophy are equated with the emergence of an ancient counterpart to secular political thought. This Vernant believed was realized when pre-Socratic philosophy first began to project egalitarian ideals of political order onto the divine realm. More specifically, Vernant argues that it was Anaximander's "cosmological projection" that finalized the secularization of political thought in Greek philosophy. Consequently, the "spatial framework" of the democratizing city-state, along with new conceptions of order based on principles of equality and symmetry at the human level, would have been transferred to the natural world, and thus:

Monarchia was replaced, in nature as in the city, by a rule of *isonomia*.³⁷

Nevertheless, one could argue that even the philosophy of Anaximander—and indeed the entirety of that segment of early Greek cosmological thought that engaged with issues of "balancing of powers" and operated with concepts presupposing ideas of 'equality before the law' (ἰσονομία)—³⁸ was still unable to conceive of a radical real-world alternative to the, as of yet, unreplaced (albeit broadened) elite rule.

Thus, if one accepts, as Vernant proposed, that the origins of political-philosophical thought can be traced to the renewed focus on equality—both at the societal and cosmic levels—within early Greek thought of the late 6th century, the "secularism" that emerged would still be incapable of circumventing the religious endorsement of the societal status quo. This would imply that the political thought

³⁶ Barker 2009), 181.

³⁷ See Vernant 1982, 122; cf. 108; 119. Cf. Anax. fr. B 2 (DK).

³⁸ Cf. Alc. Crot. fr. B4 (DK).

with which this form of secularism had merged would lack the genuine capacity to instigate significant changes in the political landscape to which it referred, functioning instead (like earlier socio-cosmic concepts) as a reflection of the prevailing (albeit recently reformed) order.

Therefore, if one is interested in the emergence of a type of secular rationale that permitted the proper displacement of religious legitimization in favor of acknowledging real-world alternatives—not to mention the eventual transcendence of these alternatives through non-religiously legitimized “utopian visions of social transformation”—one must look further ahead in time.

When exploring early expressions of the latter type of secularism, the Herodotean account of the War Councils of Xerxes appears to be the most fitting starting point. For it is within this debate and its surrounding narrative that archaic Greek “political cosmology”—the projection of prevailing societal power dynamics onto the divine realm—³⁹seems, for the first time, to give way to a Classical Greek critique of the very idea that divine projections may influence the political sphere.

Summary and conclusion

In the present study, Xerxes’ War Councils of Herodotus Book VII have been examined through a reappraisal of the framework focusing on the tension between secularism and metaphysics in Herodotus’ narrative—an interpretative model originally introduced by Friedrich Solmsen.

The reappraisal of Solmsen’s interpretation presented here offers an alternative to the prevalent tragic perspective of history most usually associated with Xerxes’ unsuccessful campaign against Greece. The alternative reading of the present article suggests that Herodotus’ account of Xerxes’ councils on the eve of the Persian march, along with the narrative’s implications of divine intervention as the ultimate cause of the campaign, can be viewed as an early form of social critique—one anticipating political philosophy. In this view, the Herodotean narrative contrasts the account that emphasizes the significance of reasoned argument with one that prioritizes the absolute power stemming from divinely sanctioned customs, precisely to highlight the dangers of blind adherence to authority, customs, or laws of any kind.

Consequently, the perspective on the origins of political philosophy presented here suggests that political philosophy began to take shape in the ancient Greek world when the potential for transcending the existing social order first began to be envisioned. For political philosophy to emerge, then, it was essential to initiate the actual transformation of the socio-political problematizing capacities of the

³⁹ Cf. Al-Maini 2009.

subjects engaged in this new way of thinking—while intentionally steering clear of the divine sphere, which the earliest forms of political philosophy appeared to be particularly critical of in relation to human affairs.

REFERENCES

- Al-Maini, D. (2009) "The Political Cosmology of the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*," *JIES* 37.1&2, 89–114.
- Barker, E. (2009) *Entering the Agon*. Oxford.
- Barker, E. (2022) "Die Another Day: Sarpedon, Aristodemos, and Homeric Intertextuality," in: I. Matijašić, ed. *Herodotus—The Most Homeric Historian?* Oxford/Edmonton/Tallahassee, 161–210.
- Bischoff, H. (1932) *Der Warner bei Herodot*. Diss. Marburg.
- Dan, A. (2015) "Grecs et Perses sur les Détroits: Le démon enchaîné et la démesure du Grand Roi," *Ancient West and East* 14, 191–235.
- Evans, J. (1961) "The Dream of Xerxes and the 'Nomi' of the Persians," *CJ* 57, 109–111.
- Frisch, P. (1968) *Die Träume bei Herodot*. Meisenheim.
- Grethlein, J. (2009) "How Not to Do History: Xerxes in Herodotus' 'Histories'," *AJPh* 130, 195–218.
- Grintser, N. P. (2018) "Herodotus as a Literary Critic," in: E. Bowie, ed. *Herodotus – Narrator, Scientist, Historian*. Berlin/Boston, 157–174.
- Jacoby, F. (1913) "Herodotos," *RE Suppl. II*, 205–520.
- Jong, I. J. F. de (2014) *Narratology & Classics*. Oxford.
- Kingsley, K. S. (2018) "Justifying Violence in Herodotus' Histories 3.38: Nomos, King of All, and Pindaric Poetics," in: E. Bowie, ed. *Herodotus – Narrator, Scientist, Historian*. Berlin/Boston, 37–58.
- Köhnken, A. (1988) "Der dritte Traum des Xerxes bei Herodot," *Hermes* 116, 24–40.
- Lattimore, R. (1939) "The Wise Adviser in Herodotus," *CPh* 34, 24–35.
- Linderborg, O. H. (2018) *Herodotus and the Origins of Political Philosophy: The Beginnings of Western Thought from the Viewpoint of its Impending End* (Doctoral dissertation, Department of Linguistics and Philology, Uppsala University).
- McNellen, B. E. (1994) *Persian nomos and paranomia in Herodotus*. University of Michigan.
- Pohlenz, M. (1937) *Herodot, der erste Geschichtsschreiber des Abendlandes*. Leipzig, Teubner, 1937.
- Roy, C. S. (2010) *Political relativism: Implicit political theory in Herodotus' "Histories"* (Doctoral dissertation, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill).
- Scullion, S. (2006) "Herodotus and Greek religion," in: C. Dewald and J. Marincola eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Herodotus*. Cambridge, 192–208.
- Sheehan, S. (2018) *A Guide to Reading Herodotus' Histories*. London.
- Sinitzyn, A. (2019) Τὰ Ὅπλα τῶν Γεφυρέων of the Persian War: Herodotus on the Banishment of the Barbarians Out of Europe and the Issue of the Completeness of the First "The Histories," *Acta Archaeologica Lodziensia* 65, 83–124.

- Solmsen, F. (1974) "Two Crucial Decisions in Herodotus," *Nieuwe Reeks* 37, 139–170.
- Tralau, J. (2012) *Inbjudan till politisk teori*. Stockholm.
- Tuplin, C. (2022) "Poet and Historian: The Impact of Homer in Herodotus' *Histories*," in: I. Matijašić, ed. *Herodotus—The Most Homeric Historian?* Oxford / Edmonton / Tallahassee, 287–374.
- Vernant, J. P. (1982) *The Origins of Greek Thought*. Trans. by Michael Chase. New York.
- Winton, R. (2005) "Herodotus, Thucydides and the Sophists," in: C. Rowe and M. Schofield, eds. *The Cambridge History of Greek and Roman Political Thought*. Cambridge, 89–121.
- Zali, V. (2015) *The Shape of Herodotean Rhetoric*. Leiden.