

Phrynichus and Athens' οἰκία κακά

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Herodotus 6.21.2 Ἀθηναῖοι μὲν γὰρ δῆλον ἐποίησαν ὑπεραχθεσθέντες τῇ Μιλήτου ἀλώσει τῇ τε ἄλλῃ πολλαχῇ καὶ δὴ καὶ ποιήσαντι Φρυνίχῳ δρᾶμα Μιλήτου ἄλωσιν καὶ διδάξαντι ἐς δάκρυά τε ἔπεσε τὸ θέητρον καὶ ἐζημίωσάν μιν ὥς ἀναμνήσαντα οἰκία κακά χιλίησι δραχμῇσι καὶ ἐπέταξαν μηκέτι μηδένα χρᾶσθαι τούτῳ δρᾶματι.

So far Herodotus, in an excursus following upon his account of the capture of Miletus, the sole purpose of which is to contrast the indifference shown by the exiles from Sybaris towards the victims of the disaster with the sympathy shown by Athens. The contrast is not a precise one, since the Athenians are not in fact shown as having done anything for the remaining Milesians: they are only depicted as expressing their own feelings. Nevertheless Herodotus' placing of the story clearly has an apologetic intention and must come from an Athenian source. The Athenians had done nothing to help Miletus before its destruction and could not be reported (since the facts were no doubt known) to have done anything to help Milesian survivors. But at least an outburst of sympathy could truthfully be reported and (in Herodotus) cleverly contrasted with a lack of assistance that was in fact precisely paralleled by Athens, which could much more easily have afforded aid than the exiles from Sybaris, a few years after its destruction. The exculpatory intention is plain.

The punishment of Phrynichus in fact became a famous anecdote, frequently referred to in later literature.¹ Most of the references give only the title and the punishment: not enough to permit any conjecture as to the source. That at least the immediate source need not be Herodotus is clear from Strabo (14.1.7.635C), who names Callisthenes as his source (see *FGrHist* 124F30); but the reference is again too brief to show what Callisthenes actually said about the incident or whether he got it from Herodotus.

There was, however, another interpretation of the incident that radically changed the alleged motive. Oddly enough, we pick it up only in Ammianus, in a rhetorical excursus that, within his narrative, seems to have little point (28.1.4):

hoc argumentum [the Milesians' mass suicide] paulo post digestum tumore tragico Frynichus in theatrum induxerat Athenarum, paulisper iucunde auditis, cum coturnatus stilus procederet lacrimosus [the precise text is uncertain here], indignatione damnatus est populi, arbitrati non consolandi gratia sed probrose

¹ Nauck, *Tragicorum Graecorum Fragmenta* 721, exhaustively collects the sources.

monendi, quae pertulerat amabilis ciuitas, nullis auctorum adminiculis fulta.

(There follows an account of Miletus' founding by "Nileus" son of Codrus.)

This is essentially an anti-Athenian account. The Athenians' motive is not sympathy for Miletus, but indignation at being reminded that they had done nothing to help a city that was their own colony. Of course, the ultimate source may still have been Herodotus: the detail, e.g. the audience's gradual change of mind, may be no more than the kind of plausible invention for which later Greek historiography was notorious. But it does point up the fact that the alleged motive, both in Herodotus and in this account, is historical interpretation, based on the historian's own background and prejudices. It has no more inherent validity than a modern historian's interpretation of the same event.²

Unfortunately neither of the accounts gives us an explicit statement on chronology. Ammianus' "paulo post" is deliberately vague: he certainly, and his immediate source very probably, did not know precisely when the play was produced. Nor is Herodotus, writing a generation later, any help, at least not explicitly. The reference to the exiles from Sybaris, of course, takes us to the time immediately following the destruction of Miletus. But the artificial construct of the ill-fitting contrast with Athens — as we have seen, introduced for apologetic purposes — is by no means tied to the same time. Like so many Herodotean anecdotes, it must be regarded as essentially timeless.

It is probably safe to say that there is no ancient historical work of which an appreciable amount survives that is arranged in strict chronological sequence. Even Roman writers who follow a basically annalistic scheme — e.g. Livy and Tacitus — will sometimes add a tailpiece to a story as an appendix, even if it comes later than the actual year they have reached. Thucydides, who comes as close as possible to claiming strict chronological sequence for his main account, that of the Peloponnesian War, can be shown to abandon the framework on occasion in or-

² We cannot be sure what was the source of Ammianus' account, though it is clearly not made up by Ammianus himself. The details differ from Herodotus: the mass suicide of the Milesians and the audience's gradual change of mind (with the motive ascribed for it) are not in Herodotus. It is tempting to suggest that the author had valid independent information, perhaps from a biography of Phrynichus or of his *choregos* on the occasion. But it has to be admitted that in later Greek historiography plausible detail cannot be regarded as a guarantee of authenticity. A possible source for the anecdote in this form might be Theopompus, presumably in his work on Athenian demagogues. Themistocles was certainly treated at length in that work, and his success as Phrynichus' *choregos* must have been noted, especially as it appeared on a document. No matter who produced *The Sack of Miletus*, it could easily have been discussed in a flashback leading up to the success of the *Phoenissae*, with which it appears to be closely connected (see below). Theopompus was certainly both anti-Athenian in attitude and fond of vivid anecdotes. But this cannot be more than a guess.

der to complete a story.³ The persistent modern attempt to impose a strict chronological scheme on him in the *Pentecontaetia*, where he does not claim it himself and where it at times patently fails to make sense, can only be called a disgrace to scholarship — one that is however unlikely to be easily eradicated.⁴ Indeed, it has even been said of Diodorus, whose chronology has never been fully investigated and whose inaccuracy, even within his strange code of practice, cannot be denied, that the fact that he puts two events in the same archonship is evidence for their actually occurring in that archonship.⁵

But whatever idiosyncratic interpretations have been thus imposed on other authors, no one (I think) has ever tried to argue that Herodotus, especially in the parts of his work that describe events preceding Xerxes' invasion, makes any attempt to organize his work by chronology. He constantly tells us that this or that event "happened later" than what he is writing about in the context; and since he essentially tells rounded stories, often artfully interwoven, he clearly cannot be taken as always following chronology where he does not explicitly warn us.

Yet in the case of Phrynichus' play and its sequel, it has been almost unanimously assumed that it followed immediately upon the fall of Miletus, perhaps because here Herodotus has not given us an explicit warning. As we have seen, it was impossible for him to do so. The anecdote is introduced for an apologetic purpose, set off by the contrast with the Sybarites' clearly contemporary action. If Herodotus knew precisely when the event took place (which cannot be lightly assumed, since it was presumably told to him simply for the apologetic purpose for which he uses it), and if that happened to be some time later, it would have spoiled the contrast he was contriving if he had explicitly said so. The fact that he does not say so tells us nothing, one way or the other, about the time of the incident. That can only, if at all, be disengaged from close scrutiny of the story itself. It may reveal more than he perhaps intended.

Twenty-five years ago⁶ I tried to dissociate the story from the immediate context of the fall of Miletus. I had noted the verb ἀναμνήσαντα and pointed out

³ See, e.g., my *From Plataea to Potidaea*, 1993, 79f., based on Stolper's work with Babylonian documents. (The example concerns the death of Artaxerxes I.)

⁴ For an unfortunate recent revival, see W.K. Pritchett, *Thucydides' Pentekontaetia and Other Essays*, 1995: the *a priori* theory, not based on anything in Thucydides, has to be supported by *ad hoc* devices and misinterpretations, some of them previously discredited. (This, of course, in no way diminishes Pritchett's distinguished contributions over many years to the very different fields of epigraphy and topography.)

⁵ See Pritchett, *op. cit.*, 97f. — an argument not often advanced. It is a pity that Julia Heskell, whose Harvard dissertation *The Foreign Policy of Philip II down to the Peace of Philocrates*, Ann Arbor 1988, shows a good grasp of basic principles of interpretation to be applied in unravelling Diodorus' chronology, has not gone on to produce the full-scale study that she promised. Meanwhile the chronological sections of that work provide a useful practical introduction to the subject.

⁶ In *Antichthon* 5, 1971, 15-16 n. 44.

that "you can only remind people of what they may be presumed to have forgotten, and it would take longer than a few months to forget the destruction of one of the greatest cities in the Greek world, if one felt ties of kinship with it". My note, appearing as it did in a journal that (at that time) was not yet a major scholarly journal, and in a footnote to an article devoted to a different theme, was easily overlooked. The fact is that my argument seems to have had no effect on the traditional chronology: it has been neither accepted nor refuted, and the traditional date has continued to be stated as incontestable. I append examples in a note.⁷

That ἀναμνήσκειν normally means "remind" (in the full sense of the English word) is easily shown.

6.94.1. A slave had to remind the Persian King several times a day to "remember the Athenians" — which the King, busy with his royal duties, would very probably forget without such reminders. (We need not believe that the story is actually true.)

6.140.1. Miltiades, fulfilling the oracle on how Lemnos would be handed over to the Athenians, reminds the Lemnians "many years later" of that statement, which he was now fulfilling.

This sense normally applies even to the passive, where the verb can often be translated "remember" or "think of". Note 2.151.3 (cf. 147.4), 5.81.2 (= 89.2) (the event causing the "old hatred" happened about thirty years earlier), 8.141.1, no doubt referring to the "oracles" brought back by Cleomenes from Athens.⁸

⁷ The translation "reminded them of their own misfortunes" can, as in the older translators, apparently be combined without comment with the acceptance of a date around 493. I therefore do not list works that give the translation without an explicit chronology.

Standard works: Bury-Meiggs (1975), 156 (implied); *Cambridge History of Classical Literature* I, 1985, 262: "in 493" (Winnington-Ingram); *Cambridge Ancient History* IV², 1988, 330: "in 493/2" (Ostwald); 617: "in c. 493" (Barron) (490: Murray is undated); *Le Monde grec aux Temps classiques* I, 1995, 27: "493." (The author, excusably, did not know my article.) For the traditional nature of that date reference to *RE* s.v. Phrynichos col. 914 ("wohl 493/2") will suffice.

Of other recent works, let me mention, at random and without any denigration of the merits of those works in other respects, Pericles Georges, *Barbarian Asia and the Greek Experience*, 1994, 71f., 81, in English, and W. Will, *Perikles*, 1995, 29, in German. Charles W. Fornara and Loren I. Samons II, in a work entitled *Athens from Cleisthenes to Pericles*, 1991, do not mention the incident.

For study of the non-chronological nature of Herodotus' organization one need not look beyond the classic John L. Myres, *Herodotus Father of History*, 1953, ch. V, with tabular analysis pp. 118-134.

⁸ Blakesly is cited by Macan *ad loc.* as recognizing the obvious reference, with the suggestion that the oracles may have been among those fabricated by Onomacritus (7.6). (Macan himself has nothing to contribute.) How and Wells *ad loc.* accept this obvious reference as intended, but think it cannot be correct because an alliance between Athens and Persia seemed possible only in 480/79.

3.105.2, female camels remembering the young they left at home, is no real exception: they had presumably not been thinking about their young on the expedition and began to do so only when they knew they were headed for home. There is no way in which the verb here applied to Phrynichus can be taken to mean anything other than that he “reminded” the Athenians of what was not in their minds; the fall of Miletus would not be forgotten for some time, especially by its *metropolis*.

When originally writing about this story, I had not paid sufficient attention to an even more striking phrase, οἰκῆια κακά. On the standard dating of the incident, some translators have naturally been puzzled how to translate what Herodotus says the tragedy reminded the Athenians of. Godley’s “a calamity that touched them so nearly” (in the Loeb Herodotus) may be taken as typical. (It is copied by de Sélincourt in the Penguin Herodotus.) Older translators (Rawlinson, Macaulay, Cary) blithely translated “their own” (misfortunes or calamities) — knowing their Greek, but apparently not worrying about what the phrase might mean, when in fact the misfortunes were apparently those of Miletus and not those of Athens.

There is no doubt whatsoever that the phrase does mean “their own misfortunes”. The parallels are clear and sufficiently numerous: see 1.45.2, 3.14.10, 7.152.2, and compare 1.153.1 (πάθεα) and 3.81.2 (οἰκῆιον καλόν). Had Herodotus meant that they regarded the Milesians’ misfortunes as their own, he would have had to make this clear; and it would have added a nice rhetorical point to do so. He obviously meant just what he said: that the drama depicting the destruction of Miletus reminded the Athenians of their own misfortunes — undoubtedly misfortunes of a similar and comparable kind. The phrase can really refer only to the destruction of Athens by Xerxes’ forces. Herodotus’ point — clearly for want of a better method of apologia — is that the Athenians equated the destruction of Miletus, when they saw it in the play, with the destruction of Athens and thus showed their extreme sympathy.

As we have had to stress, the motive and its interpretation are added by Herodotus, probably following an Athenian source, which felt that some excuse was needed for the city’s failure to do anything to save her colony. It is possible that the actual formulation was part of a decree. There was presumably a formal decree prohibiting future performances: this is supported by the fact that we do not hear of any and that no quotation seems to survive. The reason for the prohibition may have been given in the decree; though Athenian decrees of the early period (if we ignore the Themistocles decree, the authenticity of which is in considerable doubt) are not given to unnecessary verbiage. It is perhaps better to assume that the reason for the prohibition and the fine rested only on oral tradition received by the historian.

But what we are here concerned with is chronology. Analysis of the received wording makes it clear that the performance and its consequences must be dated after 480/79, probably very soon after, when the destruction of Athens was a re-

They seem to have forgotten the Athenian mission that offered earth and water to the King, through his satrap of Sardis, as told in 5.73 — an offer that the Athenians never repudiated.

cent and painful memory. As I noted in my earlier discussion, that was the time when Athens was trying to build up the "Delian League" and depicting herself as the champion of her Ionian "colonies": the worst possible time, politically, to bring up her failure to aid Milertus in 494. And this seems to be the interpretation implied by the historian who was the source for Ammianus' account.

As for Phrynichus, he was obviously shocked by the reception of his attempt to depict the cruelty of the Persians, and no doubt (as Ammianus' source implies) to "console" the Athenians for the recent destruction of their city by showing that others had suffered a worse fate. The words *consolandi gratia*, describing the intention that misfired, show that the source (though obviously not Ammianus) was well aware of the fact that the play was produced after, indeed soon after, Xerxes' war, whether or not it had independent information (for as we have seen, this could be gathered from Herodotus' own account, and the motive might be supplied). We know that in 477/6 Phrynichus scored a countervailing success, under Themistocles' *choregia*, with another play (Plut. *Them.* 5.6). Plutarch does not name the play, but Bentley long ago plausibly conjectured what is now generally accepted: that it was the *Phoenissae*, the play about the Athenian victory that inspired Aeschylus' *Persae*. There is every reason for putting those two plays in close proximity: Phrynichus had learnt that the only way to "console" the Athenians was by celebrating their victory and showing the sufferings of their enemies, not the greater sufferings of their friends.⁹ The plausible date for *The Sack of Miletus* is 478/7.

The long tradition of tearing the anecdote out of its historical context has played havoc with our understanding both of the event itself and of the poet Phrynichus. Replaced where it clearly belongs, it also helps to illuminate Athenian sensitivity about the *coup* that was precisely then, in fact in the very same year 478/7, succeeding in wresting the hegemony over the Ionians from Sparta.

As often elsewhere, the imposition of preconceived patterns by scholars on their sources has created serious impediments to proper historical interpretation. It should be obvious — but the principle is difficult to learn, it seems — that we must start by trying to find out, *sine ira et studio*, what the sources are trying to express, and that we can do so only by careful study of the language used by the particular source in the particular account.¹⁰

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⁹ It is a pity that we do not know the *choregus* who produced the play that failed. We do not hear of anyone who was opposed to the *coup* that seized the hegemony. Since the effect of the play in the light of that *coup* was easy to gauge, it must have been an eminent Athenian who, at the time when he undertook the *choregia*, did not know what was being planned. This would make it particularly interesting to know his name.

¹⁰ Like all contributors to this volume, I should have much preferred to dedicate this little note to Addi Wasserstein in a *Festschrift*. Unfortunately it has had to be a memorial volume. I am sure that, precise scholar that he was, and with an unsurpassed knowledge of Greek prose, he would have found it of interest.