

WEEK SIX:
The “Others” – Greeks and Persians III

Tuesday: Persians on the Stage: Aeschylus’ *Persians*

Tuesday’s reading returns to the tragic stage. Aeschylus’ *Persians* is unique in two ways: it is the only “historical” tragedy that we have and is also the earliest surviving Greek tragedy. In the late 490s BCE Phrynichus, another early tragedian, staged the *Sack of Miletus*, a play that dramatized the defeat of the Ionian Revolt from 494 (in which you may recall that Athens participated). Herodotus (6.21) tells us that the Athenians were so upset by watching these events unfold on the stage that they fined Phrynichus and forbade future performances of the *Sack of Miletus*. Afterwards, tragedians avoided staging plays that dramatized historical events. Aeschylus’ *Persians* and another play by Phrynichus that also describes the Greek victory at Salamis are the only other “historical” tragedies that we know of. Since it is the earliest surviving tragedy, you will notice that it is shorter and simpler in its dramatic action than Euripides’ *Trojan Women*, produced almost 60 years later. In the late 470s when the *Persians* was produced, the Delian League was beginning to pursue operations against the Persians in Ionia and the eastern Aegean and Athens was just starting to assert its dominance over the league.

The play centers around the anxiety felt at the Persian court during Xerxes’ campaign to Greece. His mother, Atossa, and a chorus of Persian elders open the play by expressing their concern over the fate of Xerxes’ expedition. A messenger then appears and relates to them the outcome of the Battle of Salamis and its aftermath. The chorus and Atossa then summon the ghost of the previous Great King, Darius, who describes their current situation and how the Persians will need to proceed. At long last, Xerxes returns from his disastrous campaign in rags and he and the chorus lament together to close the play.

Assignment:

- Aeschylus, *Persians* (= Collard translation, pp. 3-31)

Reading Questions:

- How does the messenger’s description of the Battle of Salamis compare with what we read in Herodotus? To what does he attribute the Greek victory?
- How are the Persians characterized in this play? How are they compared to or contrasted with the Greeks?
- How do the behaviors and concerns of the Persians compare to what we saw in Herodotus?
- How does the play comment on Persian leadership and compare Darius and Xerxes?
- In what ways is this play “historical” and in what ways is it “mythological”?
- What messages does the end of the tragedy convey?

Thursday: Defeating the Persians III: Plataea and its Aftermath

For Thursday, we will examine one part of the final day of the Persian invasion of Greece of 480-79. After the defeat at Salamis, Xerxes and a large part of his campaign left Greece and returned to Asia. Mardonios was left in command of the Persian forces and used Thebes as his winter quarters and base of operations in the following spring. The unified Greek army assembled at Plataea to make a decisive stand against the remaining Persians. Herodotus records an initial debate between the Athenians and Tegeans about where each contingent should take up position in the forthcoming battle and then the makeup and placement of each of the forces in great detail. After some debate, several prophecies made on each side, and some initial jostling to the lines, the battle finally commences. After the main narrative of the battle, Herodotus describes several vignettes of notable events that occurred during the fighting and then discusses the Greeks' reaction to the Persian camp, including Pausanias' joke about the Persian banquet in Mardonios' tent.

Finally, we will read the end of the *Histories*. Following the narrative of Plataea, Herodotus describes the Battle of Mycale which occurred on the same day. The Persian fleet, after bringing Xerxes and a large part of the army back to Asia, had made their camp in Samos. The Greek fleet chased them there and caught them on the Mycale peninsula. A decisive Greek victory left the Persians unable to defend much of Ionia, which now largely returned to independent status under the protection of the unified Greek fleet (and which led to the formation of the Delian league). That fleet begins to press Persian territories in Thrace, the Hellespont, Ionia, and the eastern Aegean. After a few minor victories, Herodotus closes the *Histories* with a brief anecdote about Cyrus' response to the Persian request to move to the richer, more fertile Median lands.

Assignment:

- **Plataea:** Herodotus, *Histories* 9.25-89 (=Landmark pp. 675-709)
- **The End of the *Histories*:** Herodotus, *Histories* 9.114-122 (=Landmark pp. 720-722)

Reading Questions:

- What do the debates, oracles, and messages described for each side say about their character? How do these compare to what we saw in the earlier narratives?
- What epic or Homeric tropes are present in Herodotus' descriptions of this battle?
- What does the flashback describing Cyrus' response about the Persian homeland communicate as the conclusion of Herodotus' *Histories*?

People, Terms, Events and Concepts, to know from Week Six:

Aeschylus	Tegeans	Boeotians
Queen Atossa	Athenians/Spartans	Persian Camp + Spoils
Chorus of Persian Elders	Mardonios	The "Persian banquet"
Darius' Ghost	Teisamenos	Thebes
Messenger	omens/sacrifices/oracles	Artayktes
Xerxes	Alexandros	Sestos
Phrynichus	Pausanias	Cyrus' comment on Persian lands
Plataea	Artabazos	