

The correction of public opinion: the account of Kleomenes I by Herodotus

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Abstract

The reign of the Spartan King Kleomenes I was fundamental in Greek history as it was during this period that Sparta became a leader in the Greek world. Virtually the sole source for the reign of Kleomenes is *The Histories* written by the Greek historian Herodotus. Although dubbed ‘the Father of History’ Herodotus’ account of Kleomenes ([The Histories](#) Books 5:41-75, 6:50-92) has been almost unanimously described as unfavourable to the king by modern historians. However, an analysis of his writing shows patterns in Herodotus’ literary style that may put this supposedly ‘hostile’ reporting of Kleomenes into perspective in relation to the rest of *The Histories*, as well as bring to light some of the more positive angles, aspects and comments within the account which may challenge the opinion of modern historians. This analysis will be a valuable contribution to modern scholarship in demonstrating that there is more than one way to appreciate the works of the ancient historians.

Keywords: Kleomenes Herodotus Sparta Aristagoras *The Histories*

In his article “Kleomenes, Marathon, the Helots and Arkadia” W.P. Wallace states that ‘...Herodotus’ whole account of Kleomenes is notoriously hostile and unsatisfactory...’ ([Wallace 1954](#) p. 35). Wallace is not the only modern historian to have such a negative view of the account of the reign of Kleomenes I by Herodotus. Paul Cartledge in *Sparta and Lakonia: A Regional History 1300 – 362 BC* seems to agree with Wallace to some extent in his declaration that Herodotus’ account of the reign of Kleomenes is ‘...impressionistic, distorted ... and biased...’ an unfriendly description if ever there was one ([Cartledge](#), 2002, p. 124). W.G. Forrest is also critical of Herodotus’ account of Kleomenes in *A History of Sparta 950-192* ([Forest 1968](#) pp. 85-93). These judgements by modern scholars are difficult to refute because there is an extreme scarcity of primary source material on Kleomenes I. Notwithstanding the length of his reign or the importance of many of his actions as one of the kings of Sparta, ancient writers, with the exception of Herodotus, referred to Kleomenes only in passing ([Xenophon Hellenica](#) 6:5 ; [Polyaenus Stratagems](#) 8:33 ; [Thucydides](#) 1:126) with Pausanias being the only one to offer more than just a few words. Pausanias’ account of Kleomenes is negative from the outset and only becomes stronger as it continues. As he is said to have used Herodotus as one of his major sources, this may account for some of the negativity but not for its enhancement ([Pausanias](#) 3:3:10 – 3:4:8). Based on the opinion of some modern scholarship and considering that the text of Pausanias probably drew on the writings of Herodotus, one may initially agree that it is fair to deem the commentary on Kleomenes by Herodotus as negative. However, as mentioned above, consideration of his sources and extra research on *The Histories* could put Herodotus’ seemed ‘hostile’ reporting of Kleomenes into perspective.

Whether it is reasonable to say that the account of Kleomenes in Herodotus is 'unsatisfactory' as described by Wallace, and basically corroborated by Cartledge is difficult to ascertain. This is owing to the fact that there is such a scarcity of contemporary primary source material with which to be able to compare Herodotus' account. At face value there may be some aspects of the account of Kleomenes that beg further clarification. There may also be possible omissions by Herodotus. In addition, at times it seems that he could have pursued his sources with a little more vigour to obtain more details regarding some events in the reign of Kleomenes. These aspects could possibly go towards deeming the account as unsatisfactory. In judging Herodotus no one has outlined his perceived faults in more detail than Plutarch in his *Malice of Herodotus*, however it is interesting to note that he does not chastise the account of Kleomenes. In fact the one instance that the king's name is mentioned in Plutarch's *De Herodoti malignitate*, it is done in a positive manner ([Plutarch 23](#)). It should also be kept in mind that the purpose of Herodotus and *The Histories* was not to record the history of Sparta alone, and therefore some details, perhaps inconsequential to Herodotus at the time, may have gone unrecorded.

Taking into consideration the time period of Herodotus' composition of *The Histories* and his available sources, it is perfectly understandable that his account of Kleomenes would not be an overall positive one. Herodotus himself states that he compiled his *Histories* from the testimony of the sons and grandsons of the people who were present at events he describes (Herodotus 3:54, 8:65, 9:16). Two or three generations are not a long time to recover from the slights of a notorious ruler who may have damaged the reputation of a nation. However, being understandably negative in some respects does not make it fair to deem the account 'hostile' in its entirety. The sources for Herodotus were probably

ordinary people ([Lateiner, 1989](#), p. 146) and it was Herodotus' habit to analyse the character of his subject, which would have been via the information he received from his sources ([Pearson, 1941](#), p. 355 ; [Cawkwell](#), 1993, pp. 507-508). It is absolutely credible and indeed probable that the sources for the reign of Kleomenes were on the negative side, in fact it would be expected when all is considered. Kleomenes achieved power through unusual circumstances, he became the undisputed ruler for a long period of time yet ended his days broken and insane. As well, he had a record of being trialled by his peers in Sparta, some failed attempts in battle and also a little 'flexibility' in his attitude to the gods ([Hornblower 2003](#) p. 345). He did not leave any male descendants (Lateiner 1989 p. 142; Cartledge 2002 p. 124) and therefore there was no one to redeem his name after his death. It is hardly surprising therefore, only two or three generations later, that the people of Sparta who would have been accessible as sources for Herodotus, would remember Kleomenes for his notoriety. Perhaps, through some sentiments of shame, they related his story in a way designed to reduce any further slights on the people of Sparta. Modern scholarship should perhaps consider more closely the negativity that would be expected to be associated with Kleomenes so soon after his death and rate the account of Herodotus accordingly.

Herodotus employs patterns and parallels in his presentation of both the historical content and the characters contained within *The Histories*. This is especially evident when he gives accounts of rulers and kings ([Dillery](#), 1996, p. 217). From references throughout the histories, Herodotus seems to disdain members of royalty (Herodotus 3:80) and treats them correspondingly, some more harshly than others ([Lateiner 1977](#) p. 177). Cambyses, king of Persia, is an example, and he has some similarities to Kleomenes. Herodotus portrays

Cambyses negatively: he is '...incompetent, vindictive and ... (has a) brutal contempt for religious traditions...' ([Brown](#), 1982, p. 388) a judgement not so far removed from the figure of Kleomenes. Further similarities abound. The birth and parentage of Cambyses is unusual (Herodotus 3:1-3, 5:41-43), the account of his reign by Herodotus is considered by modern scholarship as '...contradictory...' and the chronology is questioned, just as with Herodotus' account of Kleomenes (Wallace 1954 p. 32 ; Brown Truesdell 1982 pp. 387-388). Both Cambyses and Kleomenes are described as having offended religious custom (Herodotus 3:29, 6:66) which may or may not be the reason for their subsequent insanity. As with Kleomenes there is the suggestion of a madness being present at birth and of course Cambyses also goes insane, although his demise differs from Kleomenes (Herodotus 3:33-42, 6:75 ; Brown Truesdell 1982 pp. 402-403). In both the accounts it could be stated that the negative detail within each account that is not immediately relevant to the history is another pattern or style employed by Herodotus to make his characters more dramatic and lively (Cawkwell 1993 p. 506 ; [Waters 1966](#) p. 158). In fact, in analysis of all the important rulers throughout *The Histories*, it appears that they all share certain characteristics, with each one developing from the last until finally Xerxes seems (as Donald Lateiner argues) to be a combination of all the rulers who came before him (Lateiner 1989 p. 165). It is also interesting to note that, also according to Donald Lateiner in *The Historical Method of Herodotus*, Kleomenes is not noted among the rulers who are considered to have been treated with negative patterning by Herodotus, indicating perhaps, that although the account of Kleomenes did contain some of the common negative traits evident in Herodotus' other rulers, they were not overt enough to be noted (Lateiner 1989 pp. 172-79). This would then suggest that the negativity in relation to Kleomenes is not a deliberate

act of hostility on the part of Herodotus. In fact, these parallels ([Munson 2001](#) p. 36)¹ evident in Herodotus strongly support the argument that he is not overly hostile to any ruler in particular but that it is his style to employ drama and emphasise the negative aspects and notoriety of a ruler (Waters 1966 pp. 169 & 171). This kind of writing was not uncommon to the Greeks, especially in regard to offenders of religious custom who held ‘...venerable positions of distrust in Greek literature...’ ([Lateiner 1990](#) p. 237). When considering the account of Kleomenes beside the one of Cambyses it would not be fair to assign ‘notorious hostility’ to Kleomenes when Herodotus’ treatment of Cambyses is far more hostile. Rather it would seem more reasonable to take into account the literary styles used within *The Histories* whilst reading.

Throughout Herodotus’ account of Kleomenes there are a number of times when Herodotus credits Kleomenes in a positive manner, showing that his account is not consistently disapproving. Three examples of these are in the chronicle of Kleomenes’ meeting with Aristagoras, the Milesian tyrant who sought military aid for the Ionians. Kleomenes refused the offer of Aristagoras of riches and territory obtainable by assisting the Ionians. Further, he asked Aristagoras to leave Sparta at once, even cutting him off in mid sentence (Herodotus 5:49-52). The first positive aspect of this account is that Kleomenes asked Aristagoras to leave his house, and indeed Sparta, albeit with the intervention of his daughter. Herodotus tells us that Kleomenes was offered bribes by Aristagoras and refused them. Although some modern scholars (Cartledge 2002 p. 124) have made this a negative aspect on the part of Kleomenes, giving the credit of his refusal to the presence of his

¹ The example of Cambyses was used both to show an example of Herodotus’ parallels as well as hostility in his reporting that is similar to Kleomenes. There are many other parallels throughout Herodotus’ with regards to Kleomenes, for example, in Book 5 Kleomenes’ march with the allies on Eleusis was attributed to vengeance, just as in Book 7 in the case of Xerxes. Herodotus 5:74 ; 7:8 ; Herodotus’ use of human agents of compulsion – with Kleomenes in Book 6:92, Mitrdates to tell the truth about Cyrus Book 1:116 and more.

daughter, Gorgo rather than to his integrity, perhaps this is not the only interpretation that can be made. It is entirely conceivable that Herodotus was emphasising the integrity of Kleomenes by describing how his daughter (who would obviously be a reflection on her father's character) interjected on his behalf. In fact, Gorgo is credited at the end of Book 7 as being the person who deciphers the message sent by Demaratos warning of the invasion of Xerxes, Herodotus credits '...Gordo the daughter of Kleomenes...' (Herodotus 7:239). If Herodotus had indeed had real hostile intent on the part of Kleomenes, he would not have made mention of her parentage. In addition having Kleomenes order Aristagoras away in mid-sentence rather than waiting for him to finish shows impatience and perhaps a little disgust. Furthermore, Herodotus goes on to finish the description of the route that would have been taken had Kleomenes accepted the offer of Aristagoras and decided to assist the Ionians. In his description, Herodotus describes in exquisite detail the difficulties that an army would have had to overcome along this route. By including this detailed account of the route Herodotus demonstrates that he considered the journey a folly, therefore in effect defending the decision of Kleomenes (Herodotus 5:52-55 ; [Flower 2000](#) p. 73). Finally, Herodotus reports that Aristagoras '...did not prove able to deceive Kleomenes ... yet he did this to thirty thousand Athenians...' (Herodotus 5:97). Considering Aristagoras was prepared to use bribery, it is more conceivable to believe that it would have been easier to deceive a single person rather than a large group, again inadvertently complimenting Kleomenes. Herodotus clearly states that Aristagoras underestimated Kleomenes.

There are more unconnected positive references to Kleomenes throughout *The Histories*. For example Herodotus explains more than once and in some detail (complete with anecdote) the Spartan belief as to why Kleomenes went mad. The Spartans believed

that he practiced the Scythian art of drinking undiluted wine. This is a lot more complimentary to Kleomenes than the Hellenic, Athenian and Argive beliefs which were all loosely connected to the madness being retribution for deception of the gods. Herodotus quite equitably puts forward the Spartan belief which serves to somehow diminish the fact and takes some of the blame off Kleomenes, moderating the negative quality of the account, even if he did state that personally, he did not believe the Spartan version (Herodotus 6:84). If Herodotus truly wished to be hostile, he could easily have omitted the Spartan view of the madness of Kleomenes. In fact the information on the Scythians seems to serve no purpose in the narrative except to explain the custom of drinking wine which is then related to Kleomenes; (Herodotus 6:84 ; Flower 2000 p. 74) almost as if to provide him with a plausible excuse. Further, in Book 6 Herodotus reports that Kleomenes was in Aegina ‘...for the common service of Hellas...’ and that Demaratos brought charges against him ‘...not so much because he cared for the Aeginetans as because he felt envy and jealousy of him (Kleomenes)...’ (Herodotus 6:61), therefore complimenting the actions of Kleomenes in Aegina and indicating that he possessed something of enough value to cause jealousy and envy in Demaratos. In Book 3 Herodotus states outright ‘...Kleomenes herein showed himself (to be) the most upright of men...’ (Herodotus 3:148). No more need be said.

According to modern scholarship, there are some omissions in Herodotus’ account of Kleomenes as well as a perceived lack of further investigation into information that could label his account as ‘unsatisfactory’. It is also suggested that there may have been information omitted concerning the Battle at Eleusis; that Eleusis was being held in friendly hands on behalf of Kleomenes and Isagoras. This information would indicate that the decision of Kleomenes to undertake the campaign had not been in error ([Tritle 1988](#) p.458).

Also concerning Eleusis, Herodotus reports that the allies did not know of the 'real' reason behind the actions of Kleomenes. This may be an example of where Herodotus perhaps could have sought a little more information from his sources, as it is a little inconceivable that the co-ruler, King Demaratos as well as the allies would march together from Sparta without a reason. However, if it is indeed the case, then it would indicate that Kleomenes was so respected as a leader that his orders went unquestioned. Taken in this manner, the episode serves to compliment Kleomenes (Herodotus 5:74 ; Cawkwell 1993 pp. 508-509). The final area of omission that has concerned modern scholarship is the existence or not of a helot revolt, perhaps caused by Kleomenes in his sojourn in Arkadia. Herodotus does not mention any such thing; however if it could be proven that the revolt did actually take place, this would be an unsatisfactory omission. No revolt has yet been proven (Cawkwell 1993 pp. 511-512 ; Cartledge 2002 p. 132 ; Wallace 1954 p.32-33). As mentioned above when determining whether the account of Kleomenes by Herodotus is satisfactory, it should be remembered that Herodotus was not writing a history of Sparta, so that not every detail of Spartan activities could be expected to have been included.

In defence of suggestions of unsatisfactory accounts contained within the *Histories*, some modern scholars have made an interesting point in Herodotus' favour. Herodotus' *Histories* was written in the oral tradition, rather than the document tradition which is more comfortable for modern historians ([Lang 1984](#) p. 93). Therefore the characteristics of the text should be assessed and judged against relevant criteria for oral tradition and its reliability as history ([Murray 1980](#) p. 470) not judged as for history reported in the document tradition. Herodotus himself was critical of his sources and makes it quite clear in his work (Herodotus 2:123:1 ; 7:152:3). He saw himself '...as a researcher, rather than an

arbiter of truth...' (Lang 1984 pp. 97-99) basically he wrote what he was told, not what he believed nor what necessarily may have happened. In addition, Herodotus was greatly influenced by Homer which gives his *Histories* a poetic quality (Lang 1984 p. 99 ; [Caskey, 1942, p. 267](#)).

In conclusion it is demonstrated through consideration of the sources of Herodotus in connection with the time period when he was writing, as well as analysis of the complete text of *The Histories* which reveals patterns and literary devices throughout, that it would not be fair to describe the account of Kleomenes by Herodotus as 'notoriously hostile' as stated by Wallace. Admittedly the account can be read more negatively than positively in parts but this is understandable when considering the above points. A lack of primary source material on the reign of Kleomenes makes the declaration that the account is not satisfactory more difficult to substantiate. However, notwithstanding this lack of source material Herodotus' account does seem to have included all the major aspects of Kleomenes' reign as it related to the time period as would be expected when considering Herodotus was not recording the history of Sparta exclusively, but rather 'history' in general. Taking these points into consideration, the account of Kleomenes by Herodotus is indeed a satisfactory one and so it is not entirely fair for modern scholarship to condemn Herodotus on this occasion. Perhaps he deserves another read.

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