

REVIEW

MOTIVES IN HERODOTUS

Susanne Froehlich, *Handlungsmotive bei Herodot.* Collegium Beatus Rhenanus, Band 4. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2013. Pp. 226. Paper, €44.00. ISBN 978-3-515-10411-1.

Susanne Froehlich sets out to accomplish two goals in this book, a revised version of her *Dissertationsschrift*: to compile an inventory of the motives Herodotus ascribes to the actors in his work—historical, mythical, or divine—and to find patterns in his explanations of the decisions those actors made. But Froehlich’s interest, and the questions she asks, go much deeper. Why was Herodotus so concerned with motives? Where did he find the ascriptions of motive he provides, and to what extent are they the result of his own thinking? What relationship do the ascriptions of motive have with his narrative art? How does Herodotus’ procedure compare with other fifth-century Greeks who attempted to explain the past? Her proposed answers to these questions, as well as the catalogue of motives she produces, contribute valuable insights into Herodotus’ working method.

Motive or motivation—the reason why someone decides to take an action—represents a central concern for Herodotus, of course, as we see in his preface.¹ One benefit of Froehlich’s approach is that she treats great and small motives alike, not only discussing the major decisions of kings and cities but shedding light on lesser-known episodes in the *Histories*. In her introduction (11–33), she justifies her project by critiquing modern scholars’ traditional attitude towards Herodotus’ treatment of motive. Too often, Froehlich writes, scholars have dismissed Herodotus’ explanations because they seemingly rely on emotions, personal characteristics, or the divine. While scholars have in recent years endeavoured to understand Herodotus in his own intellectual context (rather than imposing the standards of modern historical writing on him), ‘there has thus far been no attempt to research systematically the individual motivations as *Herodotus portrays and explicitly names them*’.² The benefit of doing so is to illuminate Herodotus’ working method: this not only

¹ καὶ δι’ ἣν αἰτίην ἐπολέμησαν ἀλλήλοισι. Froehlich uses the terms *Handlungsmotiv* and *Beweggrund* interchangeably.

² P. 14, italics orig. On the relationship between Froehlich’s treatment and that of Emily Baragwanath, *Motivation and Narrative in Herodotus* (Oxford, 2008), see the final paragraph of this review.

improves our understanding of his work, but also potentially places the events he describes in a new light.

Froehlich finds over 600 passages in which Herodotus discusses what drove someone to take a particular action. From these, she identifies just over fifty motives and classifies them in seven broad categories: emotional and character-based, social, political, economic, aesthetic, religious, and external factors. Chapter 1 (35–83) explains each of these categories and gives multiple examples from the *Histories* of each.³ To take the category of ‘social’ motives as an example, Froehlich defines these as motives arising from human interaction, with two main components: standing and prestige, and obligation and reciprocity. Thus some of the major forces at work in the *Histories* fall into this category, including honour, reciprocity, custom and tradition, punishment and revenge. Her delineations are carefully considered and generally justified, and on numerous occasions she reminds the reader that simplistic or reductionist explanations of Herodotus’ method in this regard are not warranted by the evidence.

The most common motives, according to Froehlich, include the following: external factors, fear, anger, punishment and revenge, striving for power, and oracles. The fact that this list constitutes more than half of all ascriptions of motive in the work will not surprise readers of the *Histories*. But a more interesting result emerges from the totals for each of Froehlich’s categories: about 250 socially-based motivations, about 200 emotional or character-based, and about 100 of the political, religious, and external type combined. As she points out, this means that the old view according to which motivation in Herodotus is largely personal, ignoring the political and social, cannot hold (81).

In Chapter 2 (85–134), Froehlich looks for ‘patterns of explanation’ within this array of motives—as she puts it, ‘how Herodotus makes his inventory of human motivations fruitful for historical writing’ (85). In the first section, she examines which motives are linked to specific actors, comparing the author’s practice in a number of paired situations: the past versus more recent events, Greeks versus non-Greeks, men versus women, collective versus individual. The second section of the chapter looks at patterns in political decisions, including war, usurpations, revolts, and colony foundations. In both sections Froehlich finds some significant differences in the motives which are ascribed to these various groups or in these various situations. In general, however, the differences are not found in the broad categories, but in the prevalence or absence of particular motives.

³ An appendix (189–93) lists all Herodotean motive passages arranged by these categories, broken down into the individual motives. There is also an *Index Locorum* and a separate index for individual motives.

Some examples. While political motives appear throughout the work, they do become ‘somewhat more frequent’ in the later books. Again, this is not surprising given that Herodotus begins his more tightly focused political narrative in Book 5. But there are sharper distinctions in the details. The political motives of the early books tend to involve striving for power, but, beginning in Book 5, Froehlich finds more ‘ideal/ideological’ political motives coming to the fore, most notably love of freedom. The same general pattern holds true for the Greek/non-Greek distinction. Particular motives belong almost solely to barbarians—joy, love, desire, concern for one’s memory among posterity, and dreams—others nearly always to Greeks—jealousy, bribery, love of freedom, sense of justice, law and order. But Froehlich emphasises that Herodotus’ ascriptions of motive cannot be reduced to an overarching dichotomy of barbarian = emotional / Greek = rational. Indeed, ‘for most motivations there emerge no differences between Greeks and others’ (89).

It is in the course of this chapter that Froehlich also begins to address the question of Herodotus’ relationship with his sources: to what extent do the motives ascribed in the work belong to Herodotus, and to what extent did he take them over from his sources? She is not concerned with assigning motives to specific sources (written or oral), but with sources as a part of Herodotus’ working method. From the ruptures and variations seen above, three techniques emerge: 1) Herodotus took over ascriptions of motive from his sources; 2) Herodotus inferred motives from the result or the inherent logic of certain actions; 3) Herodotus transferred patterns of explanation from his own time to actors in past periods (97). She returns to this issue in Chapter 4 (149–55), where she notes that the majority of ascriptions of motive in the work are most likely due to Herodotus’ own inferences about historical actions. But Froehlich argues that the presence of some motives is best explained by Herodotus taking them over from his source. Thus, if certain emotional motives (but not all), or dreams (but not other religious-based motives), are only attributed to non-Greeks, this is not Herodotus’ doing but a result of his sources. A more concrete case, perhaps, is provided by the importance of oracles in colonial foundation stories. Since these fit for the most part Carol Daugherty’s typology of crisis-oracle-foundation, the motivations in the stories must also belong to an earlier tradition. That is, when the motive is ‘a necessary component of particular material’, Herodotus must have found it in his source (151).

Chapter 3 (135–48) takes the results of the first two chapters and investigates Xerxes, ‘the person concerning whose motives Herodotus comments in the most detailed fashion by far’ (135). As one might expect given the complexity of motivation overall in the work, Froehlich highlights the multiple explanations Herodotus gives for the Great King’s actions. In her first example, we see the decision to build the Athos canal attributed to *megalophrosune*

(7.24). While this recalls Artabanus' warnings just previously against *mega phroneein* and *hubris*, Herodotus later uses the same term in a positive sense when Xerxes refuses to take vengeance on two Spartans for the deaths of his envoys (7.136.2). This 'specific trait of the Persian king' thus 'marks the two extremes between which Xerxes moves' (137). Herodotus could have left it there, but—to return to Athos—he goes on to claim that Xerxes wanted to make a show of his power and leave a memorial for posterity. These two motives are already familiar to the reader from eastern rulers in previous books; thus Herodotus links the Athos canal to other projects for which (in his view) there was no overriding practical purpose.

The rest of the chapter tackles the biggest action in the *Histories*, Xerxes' campaign against Greece. While Herodotus presents many motives in his narration of the king's decision to go to war, emotional ones are not among them.⁴ This is striking, given that emotion has played a role in other decisions to go to war, and that Xerxes himself takes action based on emotion elsewhere. Froehlich emphasises the importance of 'consensus-gaining motives' in the decision to invade Greece: prestige and honour, custom and tradition, punishment and revenge. And divinity has the last word. She concludes that 'the decision of Xerxes appears unassailable in the logic of Herodotean ascriptions'—and would also have appeared so to his readers (143). Thus, contrary to the common scholarly view of Xerxes as fickle or arbitrary, Froehlich argues that, when viewed in the context of the work as a whole, Xerxes appears as a man who can act rationally and call appropriate arguments into service.⁵

In Chapter 4 (149–62), Froehlich pulls the focus back out to consider what her results reveal about Herodotus' historical method. I have already mentioned some of her conclusions concerning the sources of his ascriptions of motive. In general she posits four places whence they derive. First, many come from the action itself, logically inferable from the event or its result (*to eikos/oikos*). Second, as noted above, there are motive ascriptions which derive from the narrative material, 'indivisibly linked with a certain story' (151). Thus if Herodotus gives a motive of revenge and then tells a story to provide the background for that wish for vengeance, the motive must have formed part of his source material. Froehlich notes that the third and fourth types

⁴ This is true according to her typology, but note that Xerxes' first change of mind (7.12.1) is provoked by anxiety at what Artabanus has said (*Ξέρξην ἔκνιζε ἡ Ἀρταβάνου γνώμη*), and the king goes to sleep having decided not to invade Greece. His initial reply to Artabanus' speech arose out of anger (7.11.1, *θυμωθείς ἀμείβεται*). And while Xerxes' final decision to go forward with the invasion can be attributed to the dream (a religious motive), fear is certainly present both in the king and Artabanus (7.15.1, 18.1).

⁵ Cf. her even stronger statement in the concluding Chapter 6, p. 184: 'Xerxes' decision appears not only justified, but unimpeachable' (*unanfechtbar*).

are relatively infrequent in the *Histories*—contemporary concerns which Herodotus has projected back into the past, and motives which can be traced back to historical actors themselves—but given the important junctures at which they are found (the ‘Constitutional Debate’) and the figures with which they are associated (Miltiades), more discussion of these would have been warranted.

As to the question of why Herodotus is so concerned with motivation, Froehlich points to three factors. First, they are part of Herodotus’ narrative strategy, contributing to the consistency of the narrative by linking individual episodes, integrating ‘digressive’ episodes, and creating tension in a story for which his readers already knew the ending. Second, motives are part of Herodotus’ attempt at understanding the past, that is, they make the *story* he fashions out of so many disparate elements into *history*. Third, in trying to determine historical truth, Herodotus also aims his ascriptions of motive at his contemporary audience, pushing them to interpret motivation more critically.

Finally, Froehlich turns in Chapter 5 to a comparison of Herodotus’ ascriptions of motive with those found in Aeschylus’ *Persians* (164–9) and in Thucydides (169–80). With Aeschylus, the differences are obvious but interesting nonetheless. Motives appear in the play only in passing, rather than as a fundamental theme. And although Froehlich finds only fifteen statements of motive in the *Persians*, they are all motives which also appear in Herodotus, and they cover almost the entire range of her categories. However, while she finds the tragedian’s picture of the motives of the two sides rather ‘black and white’, Herodotus’ portrayal is much more complex: his Greeks are lovers of freedom but also corrupt, jealous, and petty; his Xerxes lusts for power and revenge, but is not mad.

Froehlich has not produced the same comprehensive typology for Thucydides, focusing instead on his first two books, where she already finds 270 ascriptions of motive. Her main concern in this section is to emphasise the continuities from Herodotus to Thucydides. She argues that while the latter gives more weight to the political and external (and, indeed, expands the repertoire of such motives), the difference is one of degree and emphasis, not essence, and can be at least partially explained by the different scope of the works. This is in keeping with the recent trend in the field to minimise the gap between the two historians, but it runs the risk of ignoring some important, basic divergences in their respective approaches. For example, Froehlich explains the relative absence of certain emotional motives from Thucydides by noting that these are often associated with women in Herodotus (177–8). But one could argue that Thucydides’ decision to exclude women almost completely from his picture of political affairs marks a fundamental break from Herodotus’ conception of history. The absence of certain emotional motives from Thucydides is not then an accidental result of the scope

of his work, but the result of a deliberate choice on his part about how to explain why things happen. If Herodotus had written the history of the Peloponnesian War, wouldn't we be surprised if Aspasia failed to make an appearance?

This (somewhat extraneous) example highlights one of the potential dangers in such a typological approach. To return to Herodotus: Froehlich states that the Spartans are not explicitly motivated to act by love of freedom a single time in the *Histories*. Demaratus makes it clear they possess this attribute, but the actual motives he gives in his speech to Xerxes in Book 7 are law-abidance and obedience to the gods. Similarly, Herodotus never has the Athenians act on the basis of power politics—amazingly, as Froehlich notes, given the contemporary context in which he was composing the work (102–3). One might question the usefulness of a typology that produces such results, but this would ignore Froehlich's own recurring notes of caution, that it is always necessary to move beyond mere categorisation. In these two instances, for example, she points out that the ascriptions of motive reflect the self-portrayal of each city, and they contrast with the consistent portrayal of Aegina as motivated by malice, hubris, and enmity. Overall, I believe her results provide enough food for thought to make the effort worthwhile.

Since few who read Froehlich's book will be unfamiliar with Baragwanath's recent treatment of the issue of motivation in Herodotus—and Froehlich herself engages in dialogue with her predecessor throughout—I will conclude with some comments on their respective approaches. I hope the following polarities will not be taken as absolute. Baragwanath is interested in how Herodotus' ascriptions of motive reveal the work that he expects and encourages his readers to do; Froehlich is interested in the work Herodotus has done to create patterns of explanation via his ascriptions of motive. For Baragwanath, motive is essentially a psychological phenomenon, what a character thought (whether arising from Herodotus' speculation or some other source) when he or she decided to act; for Froehlich, motive is a particular internal or external factor (anger, revenge, an oracle, advice) to which Herodotus points in order to explain an action. At the centre of Baragwanath's study stands the reader of the *Histories* and the narrative techniques of the author; Froehlich's book revolves around the author of the *Histories* and his historical method. My last 'distinction' no doubt paints too broadly. Indeed, both scholars attempt to come to grips with Herodotus as historian, with his sources of information, with his conception of historical truth, and with the various means by which he conveyed to his readers the complexity he had discovered in attempting to explain why things happened.

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