Leonidas ‘the best of the Achaians’:
how Herodotus anchors prose via poetry

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Herodotus’ new genre of historiographical prose is, as has been argued by many scholars, actually an amalgam of many genres. It stands in the tradition of ethnographic and mythographic prose writers like Hecataeus, aims at the authority of the Homeric epics, but features an epideictic narrator who openly argues like the Ionian intellectuals of Herodotus’ own time. Some key references are:

In my paper of today I want to zoom in on one of these generic strands: Herodotus and Homer. I will discuss some examples of Homeric intertextuality in Herodotus, and at the same show the complexities involved in such readings. Before turning to my examples I will start with some introductory remarks about Herodotus and Homer, about my recent research project that investigates this relationship, and about why Herodotus’ use of Homeric poetry can be considered an instance of anchoring innovation.

Let me start with Herodotus and Homer. Although Herodotus often polemizes with the Homeric epics, and shows the superiority of his own account of the past which is based on historiē, it is clear that he is heavily indebted to Homer. The Homeric epics were Herodotus’ main model where his concept of history is concerned, as Strasburger showed; the Homeric epics were one of his main sources where his vocabulary is concerned, as Huber and esp. Chiasson in a forthcoming monograph show; and the Homeric epics provided him with many structural principles, for which we may consult Aly, de Jong and Rengakos:

W. Aly, Volksmärchen, Sage und Novelle bei Herodot und seinen Zeitgenossen: Eine Untersuchung über die volkstümlichen Elemente der altgriechischen Prosaerzählung, Göttingen 1921, 263-77
C. Chiasson, Herodotus and the Greek Poetic Tradition, forthc.
It is my firm conviction that Herodotus is also very Homeric where his narrative art is concerned (with the exception of the persona of the narrator which unlike that of the covert Homeric narrator is overt ) and to show this is one of the aims of the narratological commentary on parts of Herodotus’ *Histories* on which I am working since one year, and which I estimate will keep me occupied for at least a decade. It will be a commentary along the lines of my narratological commentary on the *Odyssey*, which I published in 2001. The principles of a narratological commentary are threefold: it is interested in the whole text, not just in the problematic bits of it; it is interested in the meso- and macro- levels, not just the micro level of individual words; and most importantly, it is interested only in the narrative aspects of the text, not, as commentaries usually are, in all that has been said or can be said about a text.

The decision to write a narratological commentary is perhaps more debatable in the case of a historical text like the Histories than a purely narrative text like the Odyssey. It means that of course I will inform myself and the users of my commentary about certain historical background information when this is needed to understand the text, for instance the symbolic value of the Spartans having long hair. But it will also mean that I will not attempt to assess the reliability of Herodotus’ account and measure it against historical ‘reality’. This, Herodotus’ value as a historical source, has been the main object, not to say preoccupation, of Herodotus’ scholarship at large, much more than his literary qualities. Although he is, routinely, praised by almost everybody as ‘the greatest story-teller of all time’, few have taken the trouble to show where his greatness resides in: it has been taken for granted rather than analysed. To do exactly this, show how his narrative art works in practice, is the objective of my commentary and in writing it I feel inspired by the following remark from the ancient historian Oswyn Murray (from his ‘Herodotus and Oral History Reconsidered’ , in N. Luraghi (ed.) *The Historian’s Craft in the Age of Herodotus*, Oxford-New York 2001, 314-25, p. 322):
The narrative of the Persian wars themselves has too long been left as the preserve of the military historian: it is time for the student of narrative techniques to consider this story for what it is – the greatest continuous prose narrative in Greek literature, and a literary masterpiece.

Being such a student of narrative techniques now already for some 30 years I voluntarily accept the challenge here formulated by Murray. Moreover, having become increasingly interested in the history of narrative techniques, in diachronical narratology as Monika Fludernik has called it, I consider it self-evident that a systematic comparison with the Homeric epics should form part of a narratological commentary on Herodotus:

I.J.F. de Jong, ‘Diachronic Narratology (The Example of Ancient Greek Narrative)’, in P. Hühn, J.C. Meister, J. Pier, W. Schmid (eds.), Handbook of Narratology, volume 1 (Berlin-Boston 2014), 115-22 (there is also an open access version on the internet)

But such an approach also perfectly fits the interest of the Anchoring innovation agenda. For there are clear signs that Herodotus deliberately adopted epic techniques to give the rather dry and unadorned style of his prose predecessors the grandeur and hence authority of the Homeric epics, the most important receptacle of Greek cultural memory in his time. In other words, Herodotus anchors the new genre of written, narrative, historiographical prose via the epic poetry of Homer.

In defending this thesis I take my cue from remarks by Charles Fornara and Bob Fowler. Discussing the crucial difference between Hecataeus and Herodotus Fornara pointed at the latter adopting Homer’s narrative style: ‘Herodotos accommodated Homer’s instruments of poetic representation to his prose work.’ Bob Fowler, the author of a recent, magisterial edition with commentary of the early Greek mythographers, also discussed what makes Herodotus different from these
mythographers, what makes him ‘the cardinal turning point in the history of historiography’, and suggested in his 1996 article that it is Herodotus’ overtness as a narrator, his constant stepping forward to discuss sources and the difficulties involved in dealing with them. In a recent workshop that I organized while being a fellow in Cologne, on ‘Herodotus and the rise of Greek narrative prose’, Fowler elaborated this claim and suggested, much like Fornara, that it was more in general the narrative quality of Herodotus’ prose, a quality that he derived to a large degree from adopting Homeric devices, that made him so crucially different.


If I therefore claim that Herodotus anchors his prose in poetry I mean that he tells his history in Homeric style in order to gain the same kind of prestige and authority for his work and himself as the Homeric epics held.

So much for the general framework of the AI project ‘Herodotus’ anchoring prose via poetry’, which at this moment is carried out by myself and a PhD, Aniek van den Eersten, and for which many more subsidiary projects are foreseen, for instance about the narrative style of the mythographers. But let me now turn from the general to the specific and take a look with you at one passage where we can see Herodotus’ anchoring of his prose via Homer at work, and where we can also see the fascinating complexities involved in trying to establish Herodotus’ anchors.

The passage I want to discuss forms part of the battle of Thermopylae, the moment of Leonidas’ death:
Histories 7.224-5.1
Καὶ Λεωνίδης τε ἐν τούτῳ τῷ πόνῳ πίπτει ἰνή γενόμενος ἀριστός, καὶ ἔτεροι μετ’ αὐτοῦ ὁνομαστοὶ Σαρπητέαν, τῶν ἐγὼ ὡς ἀνδρῶν ἀξίων γενομένων ἐπυθόμην τὰ οὐνόματα, ἐπυθόμην δὲ καὶ ἀπάντην τῶν τρηκοσίων. Καὶ δὴ Περσέων πίπτουσι ἐνθαῦτα ἄλλοι τε πολλοὶ καὶ ὁνομαστοί, ἐν δὲ δὴ καὶ Δαρείου δύο παῖδες, Ἀβροκόμης τε καὶ Ἰπεράνθης, ἐκ τῆς Ἀρτάνεω θυγατρός Φραταγούνης γεγονός Δαρεῖῳ ὡς δὲ Ἀρτάνης Δαρείου μὲν τοῦ βασιλέως ἦν ἀδελφεός, Ὑστάσπεος δὲ τοῦ Ἀρσάμεος παῖς· ὡς καὶ ἐκδίδους τὴν θυγατέρα Δαρείῳ τὸν οἰκὸν πάντα τὸν ἐωτοῦ ἐπέδωκε, ὡς μούνοι οἱ ἐσύσης ταύτης τέκνου.(225) Ξέρξεω τε δὴ δύο ἀδελφεῖς ἐνθαῦτα πίπτουσι μαχόμενοι, ὡς καὶ ὑπεξείρυσαν καὶ ἐτρέψαντο τοὺς ἐναντίους τετράκις.

Many Homeric echoes have been pointed out in this passage by scholars:

In my bold passage 3 we hear about the Greeks and Persians fighting to recover Leonidas’ body, including the literal dragging of the corpse (ὑπεξείρυσαν), which
recalls the epic motif of the struggle over a body, most famously the struggle over Patroclus’ body in *Iliad* 17-18.

In that same bold passage 3 we hear about the Spartans beating off the Persians τετράκις, four times, which recalls the epic motif of someone trying something three times and succeeding the fourth time. Bold passage 2 presents background information on two Persians that died in that same battle: they were the sons of Darius and the only daughter of Artanes, a brother of Darius, who had bequeathed his whole estate to her. Herodotus does not spell it out but the implication of this brief biographical vignette is clear: the death at Thermopylae of these two Persians means that the family of Artanes is extinct and his estate lost since the two male heirs of his only child are now dead. This passage thus resembles the pathetic obituaries of the Iliad, where we likewise hear about the personal circumstances of a warrior at the moment of his death.

All in all we may well concur with Boedeker (2003: 36) that Herodotus, called *homerikotatos* by Longinus, is here at his most Homeric, obviously to give Leonidas the heroic kleos he had hoped for.

So far so good. But actually the picture is more complicated. For Baragwanath also includes the expression ἀνήγ γενόμενος ἄριστος, my bold passage 1, in her list of Homeric echoes: Leonidas falls ‘having become or shown himself the best (=bravest) man’. She does not substantiate her claim but it is not difficult to reconstruct her thought. The expression would seem to recall Achilles’ famous qualification as ‘the best of the Achaeans’ in the Iliad:

*Iliad* 1.244

χωόμενος δ’ ἄριστον Ἀχαιῶν οὐδὲν ἔτεισας
Achilles says to Agamemnon that he once will feel remorse because he did not
honour the best of the Achaeans.

and 16.271-2

ὡς ἀν Πηλαίδην τιμήσομεν, ὃς μέγ’ ἁριστος
Ἁργείων παρὰ νησι…

Patroclus exhorts the Myrmidons to fight and thereby honour Achilles, who is by far
the best of the Greeks.

Are Herodotus’ narratees supposed to recall this Homeric expression and take it as
one more epicizing trait of the narrator? It is possible, but there are also possible
anchors for Herodotus. Boedeker (2013:35) points at the polis oriented military
elegies of Tyrtaeus:

Tyrtaeus Elegy 12.10 and 20

οὐ γὰρ ἄνηρ ἁγαθὸς γίνεται ἐν πολέμῳ
...
οὗτος ἄνηρ ἁγαθὸς γίνεται ἐν πολέμῳ

And both Boedeker and Mathieu de Bakker suggest the language of the funeral
orations as another possible model:

Thucydides Peloponnesian War 2.35.1

ἐμοὶ δὲ ἀρκοῦν ἂν ἔδοκει εἶναι ἀνδρῶν ἁγαθῶν ἔργῳ γενομένων, ἔργῳ
καὶ δηλούσθαι τὰς τιμὰς
To me [Pericles], it would have seemed sufficient when men have proved themselves brave through acts, also by an act [the ceremony of their public burial] to make manifest the honours we render them.

Finally, I point out myself in my commentary ‘to be’ that the expression ἀνήρ ἀγαθὸς genesthai is also found in inscriptions, e.g.


But even now we have not exhausted all possibilities. The epic notion of ‘the best of the Achaeans’ refers to a permanent trait: Achilles is seen by all, Greeks, Trojans and narrator, as the best warrior before Troy, with Ajax coming second. In the case of Leonidas, however, we are dealing with a different kind of ‘best man’, namely ‘the best man of the match’, that is ‘the best warrior of a particular battle’. Herodotus regularly adds reports on ‘the best’ fighter to his battle narratives, Marathon, Salamis, Plataea, and Thermopylae itself (cf. 5.112; 8.17, 93; 9.71-4, 105). Thus we read in chapter 226 about the best man at Thermopylae being the Spartan Dieneces:

Λακεδαιμονίων δὲ καὶ Θεσπιέων τοιούτων γενομένων ὅμως λέγεται ἀνήρ ἄριστος γενέσθαι Σπαρτιήτης Διηνέκης:

While the Spartans and Thespians manifested themselves as such, it was yet the Spartan Dieneces who was said to have been the best of all.

What we are dealing with here is the custom of awarding (first, second, and third) prizes of excellence (ἀριστήμα) to the ‘best warrior(s)’ of a battle, both individuals
and (in the Persian wars) cities, a custom to which Herodotus himself refers in 8.11 and 123-4 and which we also know from Plato *Laws* 12.943c:

‘The prize for each class shall be a wreath of olive leaves; and this the recipient shall dedicate, along with an inscription, in whatever temple of the war-gods he chooses, to serve throughout his life as a proof that he has been awarded first prize of the *aristeia*.’

Returning once more to the Thermopylae passage and Leonidas being described at the moment of his death as ἀνήρ γενόμενος ἀριστος we are left with the question which resonance or resonances this expression has. My interpretationary strategy would be to start and explain Herodotus out of Herodotus. Thus in my lemma I write that the narrator is here

First) awarding himself (qua narrator) Leonidas the prize of best man of the battle, parallel to or perhaps even in contrast to the Greeks themselves awarding Dienekes that prize.

Second) echoing the language of the Homeric epics, Spartan elegies, Athenian funeral orations, or funerary inscriptions. Of course we must allow for the possibility that the expression ‘*agathos or aristos aner genesthai*’ in all the later cases (the prize of the aristeia, the elegy, the funeral oration, or the inscription) was derived from the Homeric epics.

I sum up. The passage from the battle of Thermopylae clearly shows the Herodotean narrator anchoring the new genre of written narrative historical prose via narrative devices of the Homeric epics, and thus appropriating the poetic prerogative to confer kleos. At the same time, we see him in the specific case of the expression ἀνήρ
γενόμενος ἄριστος also using other, more contemporary anchors (the prize of aristeia, military elegy, funeral oration, and public inscription).

This conclusion confirms my opening remark that Herodotus’ *Histories* is an amalgam of genres. Even when he clearly and emphatically anchors his prose in poetry, foremost the Homeric epics, we must always be on the alert for other anchors.