To yoke a bridge: poetical implications of the subjugation of nature in Herodotus’ Histories

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Project: Anchoring prose via (or against) poetry in Herodotus

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Taking as my starting point Herodotus’ position as the father of history and his position in between poetry and prose, my project explores Herodotus’ figurative language and aims to shed light on Herodotus’ use of poetry to anchor the new genre of literary prose. To explore this I will look at the poetic side of Herodotus’ language, focusing on figurative language, including metaphor. I will look at Herodotus’ debt to his poetic predecessors, but also to his own poetic abilities in creating images. By looking at a kind of language that was associated more with poetry than with dry prose treatises in Herodotus’ time we can explore how Herodotus elevates the new genre of history by anchoring it in poetry.

There are two things I aim to do in this paper. First, I will discuss the theory of figurative language. The research on this is vast and expands far beyond literary studies, so I will keep to a brief overview of the studies that up to now have seemed most relevant for my topic. In the second part of my paper I will discuss one of Herodotus’ poetic images: the bridge as a yoke. Aeschylus coins this image of the
bridge as a yoke in his *Persians* and Herodotus seems to use it to guide the readers of his *Histories*.

Let me start with the issue of a workable framework of figurative language. Figurative language denotes all language that is not used literally. I started out to look for figurative language in Herodotus because I expected that non-literal language would stand closer to poetic language than literal language does. The issue turned out to be a bit more complicated. Figurative language is not a feature of poetry alone, but it is found also in ordinary, daily use language. Especially when it comes to metaphor, one of the main categories of figurative language, it is misleading to claim that it is strictly poetic. In the seventies George Lakoff and Mark Johnson did ground breaking research on metaphor, which resulted in the book *Metaphors we live by*.¹ They show that metaphor, or what they call conventional metaphor, is part of ordinary language and even part of our cognitive system. There is nothing poetic about it, it seems. When we say that we are at a crossroads in life, we do not only phrase our experience within the metaphorical idea of *LIFE AS A JOURNEY*, but our actual experience of this vital crossroads is similar to our experience of actual road intersections. The idea is not only present in language, but for an important part in experience and cognition. Lakoff and Johnson have found a whole system of conventional metaphors that pervade every form of language.

So why is it that people tend to associate metaphor with poetry? Can we even distinguish poetic metaphors from conventional metaphors? Yes, there is a reason to associate metaphor with poetry, since poets have their own ways of using metaphor. In a follow-up study, Lakoff, now with Mark Turner, explores poetic metaphors. I will briefly explain how they think poetic metaphor is different from conventional metaphor.²

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¹ Lakoff and Johnson (1980).
² Lakoff and Turner (1989).
Basically they suggest that most poetic metaphors are created on the basis of conventional metaphors via the procedure of extension. A conventional metaphor can be made poetic by filling in details that are not commonly used in everyday language. In this way, poets direct attention to the conventional metaphor; something that does not happen when people apply conventional metaphors in everyday language. To give you one example: Shakespeare, in Hamlet’s famous soliloquy, fills in the detail of dreaming in the conventional metaphor DEATH IS SLEEP: ‘To sleep? Perchance to dream! Ay, there’s the rub; For in that sleep of death what dreams may come…’. The poet here even explicitly emphasises the rub in this new detail of dreams in the sleep of death.

Apart from the system of extended conventional metaphors, there is a second kind of poetic metaphor: the image-metaphor. Whereas conventional metaphors involve the mapping of concepts onto other concepts, image-metaphors involve the mapping of one image onto another image. You can for example think of Breton’s line ‘My wife (...) whose waist is an hourglass.’ To understand the metaphor we need to superimpose the image of an hourglass upon the image of a woman’s body to see the slender part of the hourglass as a woman’s waist.

These two ways in which Lakoff and Turner allow for poets to be more creative and original with metaphors than ordinary people could prove useful in studying poetic images in Herodotus. However, things are still more complex. Gerard Steen has argued in his book Understanding Metaphor in Literature that what Lakoff and Turner call poetic metaphors should rather be called literary metaphors, as any product of literary production can display this creativity with language. What is more, Steen shows that readers of all literature, not only poetry, pay special attention to metaphor. So the connection between literature and metaphor is twofold:

3 Hamlet (Act 3, scene 1), example from Lakoff and Turner (1989: 19).
on the one hand, literary metaphor production is distinct from conventional metaphor use, and, on the other hand, literary metaphor reception is distinct in that readers tend to pay special attention to it.⁶

One might ask then how Herodotus relates to poetry by using metaphors when extended conventional metaphors and image-metaphors are literary and not distinctively poetic. Well, in Herodotus’ time prose had a different status than it has now. Prose literature was something that did not quite exist yet. There were of course prose writers before Herodotus, but their works are rather unadorned scientific or medical treatises or overviews of mythology. Literature before Herodotus’ time was poetry. Now, it was exactly Herodotus’ ambition to elevate prose to the status of literature. So with the appropriation of poetic elements, like Homeric narrative techniques and literary metaphors, Herodotus turns prose into a new literary genre.⁷

Now it is time to turn to an example of Herodotean imagery. The image I want to discuss is the bridge as a yoke, and especially the use of the words ζεύγνυμι and ζυγόν in this context. The first meaning of the word ζεύγνυμι is of course ‘to bring under the yoke’. It can however, as in English ‘to subjugate’, also be used metaphorically to denote any kind of suppression. The metaphorical meaning arises when animals are no longer the object of the verb. The gods can yoke humans with necessity as in the Homeric Hymn to Demeter 215-6 and Bacchylides 11.45. It also becomes a metaphor for the relation between a ruler and his subjects. Roger Brock, in his book on Greek political imagery, suggests that this use started in the archaic period with the image of the charioteer and his horse that denotes elite prowess and mastery, which is easily transferred from a subject ‘horse’ to a subject ‘fellow man’.⁸

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⁷ See also De Jong’s paper at this conference.
⁸ Brock (2013: 87-8).
Examples of this image can be found in Theognis’ poetry, but also later in Aeschylus’ Agamemnon and Sophocles’ Antigone. In the classical period the image becomes connected to Persian rule. And indeed we see that in Aeschylus’ Persians the yoke is one of the more important metaphors of the play. One of the ways in which Aeschylus uses the yoke seems to be especially important for the Histories. He describes Xerxes’ bridge across the Hellespont as a yoke on the sea at 70, 130, 722 and 736.

Now let me turn to Herodotus. Many scholars commenting on Aeschylus’ striking image point to its use by Herodotus to show that after Aeschylus the image became a normal, straightforward way to describe a bridge or, as we would now say, became a conventional metaphor. They assume that the use of the image by Herodotus proves this. Even Brock calls the image ‘literal’. Yet a critical look at the places where the words ζυγόν or ζευγνύμι are used to describe bridges in classical Greek shows that this meaning occurs almost exclusively when Persians connect the opposite banks of rivers or sea straits that their adversaries would rather not see connected. A different case is the word ζεύγμα, as Michelini points out, which is often used of bridges of the military kind that Persian rulers build: the bridge made out of boats functions like a yoke that connects naturally separate elements.

So Herodotus could have chosen to use the technical and conventional word ζεύγμα, but instead, like Aeschylus, he chooses to make the image literary by using the unconventional words ζυγόν and ζευγνύμι. He clearly wants to make a point. A further indication of Herodotus’ conscious application of the image is the addition of

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9 Thgn. 847-50 (cf. 1023-24).
10 A. A 1639-40; S. Ant. 289-92.
12 In The Histories: Cyrus’ bridge on the Araxes: 1.205, 206; Darius’ bridge on the Ister: 4.89, 97, 128, 142; Darius’ bridge on the Bosporus: 3.134, 4.83, 85, 87, 88, 89, 118, 7.1; Xerxes’ bridge on the Strymon: 7.24, 114; Xerxes’ bridge on the Hellespont: 7.6, 8, 10, 33, 34, 35, 36, 157, 8.20, 9.120.
the detail of the ‘neck’ of the yoked animal in the image of the Ister and Bosporus.\textsuperscript{14} 

The neck of the sea was already present in Aeschylus’ first use of the image at 70: ζυγὸν ἀμφιβαλὼν αὐχένι πόντου. The proliferation of comments in the commentaries on Herodotus on this seemingly simple image shows that the use of αὐχήν to denote a narrow space is quite exceptional and original, and I think that Herodotus’ appropriation of the extended image underlines the idea that he does not use the image conventionally.

Next arises the question whether the chronology allows for Herodotus to be influenced by Aeschylus’ \textit{Persians}. Although he was not present at the original staging in 472 BC, as he was only a boy of approximately twelve years old at the time, Herodotus certainly was familiar with Aeschylus’ work. The explicit reference to the poet and his work at 2.156 testifies to this. It seems unlikely that a writer working on the Persian Wars knew about Aeschylus’ work, but not about his \textit{Persians}. Moreover, the metaphor of the yoke is central to the play and present in crucial scenes. This makes it all the more likely that Herodotus had heard of it in reperformances at symposia and other festivals.\textsuperscript{15} So I think it is safe to conclude that the image is indeed an Aeschylean echo.

So, what then is the significance of this Aeschylean echo and what the function of the image of the yoke in Herodotus? To start with the second question: the description of a bridge as a yoke on a river implies that the river is less powerful than the man that builds the bridge. Immerwahr states that “the crossing of rivers (…) is a significant motif in Herodotus, and it is always used to prove the \textit{hybris} of the aggressor.”\textsuperscript{16} Later Lateiner points out that in Herodotus’ work the transgression of limits always leads to significant events. The bridges, he explains, are a transgression of limits in several ways. Rivers are the natural boundary between territories and a

\textsuperscript{14} At 4.85, 89 and 118.

\textsuperscript{15} Cf. Morrison (2007: 15-23) on the reperformance of Pindar’s odes.

\textsuperscript{16} Immerwahr (1966: 293)
bridge violates this; bridges block natural flowing water and maltreat a god as if he were a slave or animal; and bridges interfere with nature by turning sea into land.\textsuperscript{17} Rosenbloom in his commentary on Aeschylus’ \textit{Persians} even states that: “to enslave the sea, divinity embodied in nature, is âte.”\textsuperscript{18} The image of the bridge as a yoke underlines and explains why the crossing of rivers is such an act of \textit{hybris} or even âte: it emphasises that building a bridge is equivalent to thinking that you are more powerful than nature, more powerful than the gods; it is equivalent to thinking that you can yoke them like you would yoke an animal.

Moreover, the image of the bridge as a yoke is used of all the Persian kings’ significant crossings of rivers in the \textit{Histories}.\textsuperscript{19} It first appears with Cyrus’ bridge across the Araxes: the onset to his battle with the Massagetae and his own death. It describes Darius’ bridges over the Bosporus and Ister in his campaign against the Scythians. And last but not least Xerxes’ bridges across the Strymon and the Hellespont are compared to yokes. Cyrus’ and Darius’ bridges foreshadow the most significant bridge in the work, Xerxes’ bridge to subdue Greece. The employment of the same image for all these bridges underlines the climactic connection.

Finally, the connection to Aeschylus, in my view, enhances the suspense created by the image. Like Herodotus himself, a considerable part of his audience must have been familiar with Aeschylus’ image of the yoke. The image of the bridge as a yoke then might have immediately made them think of Aeschylus’ Xerxes. The connection with Aeschylus gives Herodotus’ audience a point of reference to link the stories of earlier Persian rulers to Xerxes. It functions as a connecting thread through the narrative of the rise and fall of Persian rulers and their relation to Greece.

So rather than changing the words \textit{ζευγνύμι} and \textit{ζυγόν} into conventional words to describe military bridges, Herodotus retains the literal meaning of the

\textsuperscript{17} Lateiner (1989: 128-9). See also Von Scheliha (1931).
\textsuperscript{18} Rosenbloom (2006: 42).
\textsuperscript{19} See note 12.
words and the connection they have with Aeschylus’ poetic narrative of the Persian Wars, and uses it to attach significance to the bridges he thus describes. In other words, by using a literary metaphor to describe the connecting of the Persian bridges, he adds a layer of meaning to his prose, thus elevating it. This poetic use of metaphor connects Herodotus’ prose to poetry, and anchors the new genre of literary prose in the established genre of literary poetry.
**Bibliography**


