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**The Choice of Athens (Herodotus, Histories 7.139)**

In the well-known "Encomium of Athens," Herodotus argues that the Athenians ought to be called "the saviors of Greece," because it was they who, by resolving to face the Persians at sea, "chose that Greece remain free" (7.139.5). This argument presents a fundamental problem for many interpretations of the Histories. It is often asserted that Herodotus had a deterministic view of history and that, in particular, Herodotus saw the defeat of Xerxes as inevitable, the conclusion to a quasi-natural process regulated by divine or natural forces (see, e.g., Immerwahr 1966, Hunter 1982, Romm 1998). Yet the point of Herodotus' argument in the Encomium is precisely that the Athenians had it in their power to reverse the ultimate outcome of the war. If the Athenians had not chosen to resist the enemy, Herodotus claims, then "Greece would have become subject to the Persians" (7.139.4). The course of history, he seems to suggest, was contingent upon a free choice.

But was the Athenian choice, in Herodotus' view, truly free? Immerwahr (TAPA 1954), for one, claims that in the Histories human choice is itself bound up in, and plays a part in furthering, the necessary process of history. Two elements in the Encomium are thought to show that, in the historian's eyes, the Athenian choice was driven by a higher necessity. First, Herodotus uses the image of the "scales of fate" to describe the momentous nature of the choice and, second, Herodotus concludes the passage by stating that the Athenians--after the gods--drove away the enemy. However, in alluding to the "scales of fate," Herodotus clearly indicates that the Athenians were free to choose between more than one alternative. For he claims that they (not the gods or fate) had decisive control over which way the scales would tip (7.139.5). Moreover, Herodotus does not make clear what role he means to assign to the gods; but his concluding statement may merely imply that the gods' help was necessary to the Greek victory, not that divine powers literally destroyed the Persian expedition. Remarks made by the historian elsewhere, e.g. his assertion at 8.13 that the gods sent a storm to "even out" the Greek and Persian fleets, support this interpretation.

Thus, the argument of the Encomium suggests that human agency is a crucial and independent factor in historical events. Whatever role divine and natural forces play in Herodotus' narrative, they do not, in the historian's considered view, determine the basic shape of human history. That shape is determined by a number of contingent factors, including the choices and actions of those who experience, participate in, and comprehend historical events.