

Charles CHIASSON

Myth, Ritual, and Authorial Control in Herodotus' Story of Cleobis and Biton

I argue that Herodotus consciously, cunningly incorporates elements of myth and initiatory ritual into his story of Cleobis and Biton, which is told by Solon as secondary narrator but focalized by the primary narrator of the *Histories*. The introduction to the story contains elements (e.g., the passive verb *legetai*) that signal a transition from the realm of historically plausible narrative—i.e., the story of the Athenian Tellos, which precedes the story of Cleobis and Biton—to a realm of ostensibly legendary discourse. In this realm I discern both local and Panhellenic mythical features. The unexpected death of the brothers as reward for service to the goddess Hera parallels the legend of Trophonius and Agamedes, whose recompense from Apollo for building his first temple at Delphi proves to be the boon of peaceful death in their sleep—a distinctively Delphic display of the ontological and epistemological chasm that separates mortal from immortal. In Herodotus' narrative it is the unwitting prayer of the boys' mother to Hera that precipitates their death, and in this association between maternity and mortality we see a Panhellenic mythical motif that is familiar from early Greek hexameter poetry. An especially instructive parallel is the Eleusinian queen Metanira, who in the Homeric Hymn to Demeter inadvertently interrupts her son's immortalization by the goddess, thus condemning him to mortal existence. The angered Demeter berates Metanira for her typically human ignorance of the future, while Herodotus makes a similar point more sympathetically by describing the mother of Cleobis and Biton as *perichares*, "overjoyed"—an adjective that elsewhere in the *Histories* always foreshadows disaster for the person so described, and here casts a transient tragic shadow in an otherwise celebratory context.

Initiation ritual is reflected not only in the setting of the narrative (the Argive festival known as the Heraia), but also in details of vocabulary and emplotment that call attention to the brothers' liminal status, poised between childhood and manhood. At Hera's temple, Argive women congratulate the mother and Argive men congratulate her sons in a display of gender segregation that underscores the brothers' social transition from the female domestic world to the male civic world. Similarly, although before their death Cleobis and Biton are consistently referred to as either young men (*neaniai*) or their mother's children, after their death the Argives dedicate statues of the brothers at Delphi "on the grounds (*hos*) that they had proved to be outstanding men (*andron ariston genomenon*)." This phrasing implies not only attainment of adult status, but also (to judge from Herodotus' other uses of the phrase *aner aristos genomenos*) assimilation of the brothers' feat to the ultimate civic service, death in battle. In my view the particle *hos* is critical, however: it marks the Argive accolades as honorary, by significant contrast with Solon's choice as *olbiotatos*, Tellos, who in the fullness of his life was a father, grandfather, and citizen-soldier who literally died fighting for his *polis*. Thus the initiatory framework of the story subtly indicates the reasons why Solon considers Tellos more fortunate still than Cleobis and Biton.