



MYTHOPOUCH

RETELLING

HERODOTUS: THE HISTORIES

VOL. 6 THE IONIAN REVOLT

Chapters 21-24

A modern educational version for readers aged 15 and up

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CHAPTER 21: ATHENS, SPARTA, AND THE ROAD TO THE FIRE

Before a coast can revolt, Herodotus wants you to know the two cities that will be asked for help, because the war that is coming is not only a Persian war. It is a Greek argument about what a city is.

Athens had been under the **Peisistratids**, a tyranny that began with Peisistratus and a piece of theatre (a tall woman dressed as Athena, riding in a chariot into the city ahead of him) and that lasted, with interruptions, until his sons. **Hipparchus** was killed by **Harmodius** and **Aristogeiton**, lovers, after Hipparchus had insulted Harmodius's sister by refusing her as a basket-bearer at the Panathenaea and then calling her unchaste. They meant to kill Hippias, the ruling brother, as well. They killed Hipparchus. Hippias lived, and the tyranny hardened. Herodotus is careful here, more careful than the Athenian drinking-songs. The tyrant-slayers did not end the tyranny. Sparta did, four years later, when the Alcmaeonids, an exiled Athenian family, rebuilt the temple at Delphi more beautifully than the contract required, and the oracle took to telling every Spartan who asked about anything that Athens must first be freed.

Freed, Athens quarrelled with itself, and then with Sparta, and then grew. **Cleisthenes** reorganised the tribes so that old local factions could not simply own them, and gave the people the constitution Herodotus credits with their later nerve. When the Spartans tried to put Isagoras and a narrow oligarchy back in, the people besieged them on the Acropolis and let them out under a truce, and killed the party that had invited them. Herodotus's judgement is blunt. Athens, held down, had been no better in war than her neighbours. Freed, she became the first of them. It is a political claim as much as a military one, and he knows it.

SPARTA, AND A KING WHO WAS NOT QUITE BELIEVED

Sparta he describes by its kings, its double kingship, and its habit of sending armies under men who could be prosecuted at home for what they did abroad. **Cleomenes** is the king who will not leave the next chapters alone: capable, suspect, eventually mad in the Spartan account, which Herodotus reports with the usual stack of explanations, including one that he had picked up the Scythian habit of drinking unmixed wine. Cleomenes interferes in Athens, fails, interferes in Aegina, quarrels with his fellow king Demaratus, and has Demaratus deposed on a question of birth. Demaratus goes to Persia. He will stand beside Xerxes later, telling him truths the court does not want.

Historian's Note: Freedom and the fleet

Herodotus's praise of Athenian freedom is real, and it is not simple. The same city is about to abandon the Ionians, sacrifice nothing it can avoid, and then, at Marathon and Salamis, do the thing he thinks saved Greece. He is not writing a hymn. He is watching a constitution under pressure, and he thinks the pressure reveals it.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The Athenian songs say Harmodius and Aristogeiton freed the city. Herodotus says they did not. Why does a city prefer the song?
2. Cleisthenes changes the tribes, and Herodotus links the change to courage in war. Do you find that link convincing, or too neat?
3. Demaratus is thrown out of Sparta and will tell the truth in Persia. What does exile do to a witness?

CHAPTER 22: ARISTAGORAS AND THE BRONZE MAP

The revolt begins in a failure. Exiles from Naxos asked **Aristagoras**, deputy tyrant of Miletus, to put them back. He asked Artaphernes, the Persian governor at Sardis and brother of Darius, for ships. Artaphernes asked Darius, and Darius agreed, and sent Megabates with two hundred ships. On the way Megabates and Aristagoras quarrelled. A watch had not been set on a ship, and Megabates punished the captain, a guest-friend of Aristagoras. Aristagoras released him. Megabates, Herodotus was told, warned the Naxians. The siege failed after four months. Aristagoras had promised Artaphernes the costs. He could not pay. He had also had a message from **Histiaeus**, the real tyrant of Miletus, kept by Darius at Susa as a friend who was not allowed to leave, telling him to revolt. The message was tattooed on a slave's shaved head, and the hair had been left to grow back over it.

Aristagoras gave up the tyranny in words, established equality of government in Miletus, and did the same, or pretended to, in the other Ionian cities, handing over tyrants who had been arrested off the fleet. He needed a stronger ally than a phrase. He went to Sparta.

CLEOMENES LOOKS AT THE MAP

He brought a bronze tablet on which the circuit of the whole earth was engraved, and every sea and every river. He told Cleomenes the Ionians were slaves, and that a successful revolt would bring gold, silver, bronze, embroidered clothes, beasts of burden, and slaves, all to be had in Asia, and that the Persians were easy to beat, fighting in trousers, with turbans on their heads. Cleomenes asked how many days' march it was from the sea to the king. Aristagoras, who had been clever until that moment, told the truth. Three months. Cleomenes cut him off and told him to leave Sparta before sunset. The map had been a mistake. It showed the distance.

Aristagoras followed him home with a suppliant's branch, and found him with his daughter **Gorgo**, a child of eight or nine. He asked Cleomenes to send the child away, and offered ten talents, then fifty, to reopen the alliance. The child said: Father, the stranger will corrupt you, unless you get up and go. Cleomenes was pleased, and went into another room, and Aristagoras left Sparta.

He went to Athens, where he did not have to outbid a child. He told the same story, and added that Miletus was an Athenian colony, and that Athens, at the height of her power, ought to help. He promised everything, and asked for nothing in particular he could not sound as if he were giving. Herodotus's line is dry. It seems easier to deceive a crowd than one man. Cleomenes had been one man. The Athenian assembly voted twenty ships to help the Ionians, and appointed Melanthius to command them. Those ships, he says, were the beginning of troubles for Greeks and non-Greeks alike.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Aristagoras tells the truth about the three months, and it ruins him in Sparta. When is honesty the wrong tactic, and when is it the only one that should count?
2. Gorgo, a child, stops the bribe. Why does Herodotus give the decisive sentence to her?

3. He says a crowd is easier to deceive than one man. Is that the lesson of Athens and Sparta here, or his own preference showing?

CHAPTER 23: THE BURNING OF SARDIS

The Athenians arrived with twenty ships, and the Eretrians with five, paying a debt to Miletus from an old war. The whole force marched inland, with the Ionians, and took **Sardis** except the citadel, which Artaphernes held. They did not loot it so much as lose it. A soldier set a house on fire. The houses of Sardis were reed-roofed, and the fire ran, and the city burned, including the temple of Cybele, the local goddess. The Persians and Lydians in the market, with the river at their backs, held. The Greeks, seeing more troops coming, withdrew to the ridge of Tmolus and then, by night, to their ships.

They did not all get there. Persian forces caught them at Ephesus and beat them hard. The Athenians after that refused every message Aristagoras sent, and went home. They had been present for the fire. They would not be present for the war the fire made. Darius, when he heard, asked who the Athenians were. Told, he called for his bow, shot an arrow into the sky, and prayed that he might be allowed to punish them. He told a servant to say to him three times, whenever dinner was set: Master, remember the Athenians.

A REVOLT THAT SPREADS, AND A MAN WHO WILL NOT STAY

The burning of the temple gave the Persian cause a holiness it used. The revolt itself spread: to Byzantium, to Caria, to Caunus, to Cyprus, where Onesilus persuaded his brother the king of Salamis to join, except the city of Amathus, which he besieged. The Persians crossed to Cyprus. Onesilus was killed. Cyprus was recovered. In Ionia the war went on without a centre. Aristagoras, watching it fail, took counsel. A man called to speak said what others thought: leave. Aristagoras settled the people who would follow him at Myrcinus in Thrace, the place Darius had once given Histiaeus, and died there in a fight with Thracians, city and all.

Histiaeus, at Susa, persuaded Darius that he could stop the revolt if he were sent down to the coast. Darius let him go. Artaphernes, who lived in the same world as the tattooed head, was less impressed. Histiaeus arrived in Sardis and was told, by the governor, that he had stitched the shoe and Aristagoras had put it on. He fled to Chios. The Chians did not believe his story of having raised the revolt for their sake. He tried Samos, and piracy, and a return to Miletus, and was refused by the Milesians, who had had enough of tyrants. He ended, later, caught on a raid on the mainland, and Artaphernes and Harpagus impaled him and sent his head to Darius. Darius blamed them for not bringing the man alive, and had the head washed and buried, as a man who had once done him a service at the bridge.

Historian's Note: Who burned the temple

The fire in the temple of Cybele is the sort of accident that campaigns are later said to have intended. Herodotus presents it as a soldier's act in a reed city, not a policy. Darius's dinner reminder is theatre, and it tells you how the war will be personalised: not Ionia, but Athens. That narrowing decides the next twenty years.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Athens sends twenty ships and then withdraws. Does the withdrawal cancel the responsibility for the fire, or fix it?
2. Darius has a servant remind him of the Athenians at dinner. What does a king lose by turning a province's revolt into a private insult?
3. Histiaeus serves Darius, uses Darius, and is killed by Darius's servants, who are then scolded. Whose man was he?

CHAPTER 24: LADE, MILETUS, AND THE PLAY THAT WAS FINED

The Persians gathered a fleet from Phoenicia, Cyprus, Cilicia, and Egypt, and came for Miletus by land and sea. The Ionians decided not to defend the walls with their own men. They would fight at sea, off the island of **Lade**, and leave the Milesians to hold the city. They assembled three hundred and fifty-three ships. Dionysius of Phocaea took command in practice if not in title, and drilled them hard, rowing through one another, arming the marines, and keeping them at it through the day. For seven days they bore it. Then they said they would rather be slaves than endure this, and refused to train. Dionysius told them they was on the razor's edge between freedom and the thing they feared. They would not listen.

The Persian commanders had a second plan. They sent the deposed Ionian tyrants, who were with the fleet, to appeal each to his own city: come over, and you will not be burned, and you will not be sold, and no worse will be required of you than before. Refuse, and you will be enslaved, and your sons will be made eunuchs, and your daughters carried off. Most of the contingents held. The Samians, except eleven ships whose captains would not obey the order, sailed away when the battle started. The Lesbians saw them go and went. The line broke. The Chians fought until they could not, then made for home, and many of them were killed later by the Ephesians, who took them for raiders. Dionysius of Phocaea, seeing the battle lost, took three enemy ships and sailed, not home, but to Phoenicia, and from there to Sicily, to live as a pirate against Carthaginians and Etruscans, and not against Greeks.

THE FALL, AND A POET'S FINE

Miletus was taken by mining the walls, in the sixth year from Aristagoras's revolt. The temple at Didyma, with its oracle, was plundered and burned. The people were enslaved. Darius settled some of them at Ampe on the Red Sea, near the mouth of the Tigris. The Milesians who had escaped did not go back. The city that had been the glory of Ionia was empty of itself.

Athens took the news harder than her twenty ships had earned, or exactly as hard. When Phrynichus produced a play, *The Fall of Miletus*, the theatre wept, and the city fined him a thousand drachmas for reminding them of a calamity that was their own, and forbade the play to be staged again. Herodotus records the fine without raising his voice. It is one of his best sentences about a democracy. Grief was allowed. Being made to look at it was not.

The Persians spent the next year taking the islands and the remaining cities. They netted some islands with a line of men, and castrated the boys they found most beautiful, and sent the girls to the king. The cities were then handed back, in a colder peace, to a system of treaties, and the tyrannies were not all restored. Artaphernes measured the land and fixed the tribute at about what it had been, and the measurement stood. The revolt was over. It had burned a temple, emptied Miletus, and taught Darius the name of a city he now said aloud at dinner. The next fleet would not be coming for Ionia. It would be coming for Athens and Eretria, the two cities that had sent the ships.

THE REVOLT IN FOUR MISTAKES

Mistake	Who	What followed
A siege of Naxos he could not pay for	Aristagoras	A revolt as an exit
Showing Sparta the distance	Aristagoras	No Spartan army
A fire in a reed-roofed city	A soldier at Sardis	A holy war, and a king's reminder
Seven days of drill, then a refusal	The fleet at Lade	The loss of Miletus

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The Ionians would rather be slaves than train. Is that cowardice, or a judgement on Dionysius, or both?
2. Athens fines a poet for making the city weep at its own part in a disaster. What is a democracy protecting when it does that?
3. The Persians net an island and then settle a measured tribute. Which act tells you more about how the empire intends to last?