



## UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

### Herodotus' handling of (narratological) time in the Thermopylae passage

de Jong, I.

**DOI**

[10.1163/9789004383340](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004383340)

**Publication date**

2019

**Document Version**

Final published version

**Published in**

Textual Strategies in Ancient War Narrative

**License**

Article 25fa Dutch Copyright Act

[Link to publication](#)

**Citation for published version (APA):**

de Jong, I. (2019). Herodotus' handling of (narratological) time in the Thermopylae passage. In L. van Gils, I. de Jong, & C. Kroon (Eds.), *Textual Strategies in Ancient War Narrative: Thermopylae, Cannae and beyond* (pp. 113-130). (Amsterdam studies in classical philology; Vol. 29). Brill. <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004383340>

**General rights**

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

**Disclaimer/Complaints regulations**

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

# Herodotus' Handling of (Narratological) Time in the Thermopylae Passage

Irene de Jong

## 1 Introduction: (Narratological) Time and the Structure of the Histories\*

A hot issue in Herodotean scholarship is the structure, or rather the apparent lack of structure, of his *Histories*. Scholars have been troubled by the 'möglichst bunte Folge Assoziationen unsachlicher Art'<sup>1</sup> and the 'Zerrissenheit und Vielspaltigkeit dieses Geschichtswerkes, seiner aus ungezählten Wirklichkeitspartikeln mosaikartig zusammengestückelten Erscheinungsform',<sup>2</sup> which means that at first sight the narratees feel 'buried under an avalanche of facts and at the same time utterly lost in a landscape bewilderingly criss-crossed and looped by stories without discernible paths or sense of structured connection'.<sup>3</sup>

Various explanations have been proposed to account for this situation: the storyteller Herodotus' penchant for entertaining his narratees which would make him insert anecdotes even if they are unrelated to his main story;<sup>4</sup> the genesis of his work as a series of independent *logoi*;<sup>5</sup> or his archaic mentality which simply is not interested in or capable of a coherent story.<sup>6</sup>

Fortunately, there have also been more appreciative responses to Herodotus' way of structuring his tale. Scholars have argued that the *Histories* achieves unity through *analogy*, which means that episodes are—paradigmatically—connected via their use of the same recurrent story-patterns or themes, such as

\* I would like to thank Mathieu de Bakker and Caroline Kroon for their comments, Nina King for checking my English.

1 Howald 1923: 128.

2 Focke 1927: 47.

3 Gould 1989: 42. Cf. Thomson 1935: 228, who compares the reader to a voyager on a ship on the river of Herodotus' *Histories*; and Lateiner 1989: 13.

4 See e.g. Fränkel [1924] 1960: 87; Von Fritz 1967: 450; and Griffiths 2006: 132. Dionysius of Halicarnassus in his *Pomp.* 3 also speaks of Herodotus introducing stories 'to add charm to the narrative', but on the whole considers Herodotus' *Histories* a unity.

5 See e.g. Jacoby 1913.

6 See e.g. Fränkel [1924] 1960; and Focke 1927.

the crossing of a geographical boundary by an oriental conqueror, an inquiring king, the rise and fall of a ruler or the tragic warner.<sup>7</sup>

Others have pointed out how *personal relationships*, such as kinship, guest-friendship and revenge, may link episodes in syntagmatic or linear fashion.<sup>8</sup> Finally, Herodotus' structure has been looked at in terms of his handling of *time*. Dionysius of Halicarnassus in his *Letter to Pompey* 3 already notes that Herodotus relates 'some events as a sequel, taking up others (προσαναλαμβάνων) as missing links in the story' but never breaks 'the continuity of the narrative'. Dionysius here more or less anticipates the modern narratological notion of the analepsis, when a narrator recounts an event not at its proper chronological place but at a later moment in the form of a flashback. The *Histories* abound in such analepses and to a lesser degree prolepses<sup>9</sup> and this led me, in a study from 2001, to call its structure anachronical: a largely chronological main story is interrupted by anachronies, prolepses which create (a forward looking) tension and especially analepses which provide (backward looking) background information; between them these anachronies create cohesion.<sup>10</sup> To be sure, the three structural devices just listed, analogy, personal relationship, and time, often operate at the same time.

In this chapter I will analyse Herodotus' handling of time in the episode of Thermopylae (7.175–7.239). Obviously I cannot discuss all prolepses and analepses, and I thus have selected five examples that will make clear in particular, I hope, the benefits of a narratological approach (with a strong linguistic basis) for the interpretation of the *Histories*.<sup>11</sup>

7 E.g. Immerwahr 1966 and Munson 2001: 45–73, esp. 46 ('comparison and analogy are fundamental strategies by which the text of the *Histories* organizes its material. Because the *logos* contains so many story elements that escape the network of causal connections of the plot, classification and the comparative approach that classification entails provide a powerful glue').

8 E.g. De Romilly 1971–1972; Gould 1989: 42–62; and Lateiner 1989: 126–144.

9 See Pohlenz 1937: 69–73, 83–88; Gould 1989: 64–65 ('the narrative mode of explanation'); Lateiner 1989: 114–125; and Grethlein 2010: 196–204. For analepses, see Huber 1965: 96–99; Lang 1984: 6–7; for prolepses Van Groningen 1953: 39–42. On analeptic explanation as a hallmark of all Greek historiography, see Hau 2014: 254–257.

10 De Jong 2001. The terms anachrony, prolepsis and analepsis derive from Genette [1972] 1980: 35–36. Together they belong to the aspect of narratological time that is called order: the order in which events are presented in a story often differs from the (reconstructed) chronological order of the fabula; see De Jong 2014: 78–87.

11 This chapter presents a preliminary version of sections from a *Narratological commentary on Herodotus Histories*, which I am working on at present.

## 2 The Prolepsis about the Anopaea Path

Thermopylae has barely been mentioned for the first time, as the place where the Greeks decide to make a stand against the Persians, when the narrator says:

τὴν δὲ ἀτραπὸν, δι' ἣν ἤλωσαν οἱ ἀλόντες Ἑλλήνων ἐν Θερμοπύλῃσι, οὐδὲ ᾗδε-  
σαν εὐόσαν πρότερον ἢ περ ἀπικόμενοι ἐς Θερμοπύλας ἐπέυθοντο Τρηχινίων.

7.175.2

And as regards the path by which those of the Greeks who were trapped and slain in Thermopylae were trapped and slain,<sup>12</sup> they did not know that it existed before, arriving in Thermopylae, they heard about it from the Trachinians.<sup>13</sup>

When one consults the commentaries on this passage, Stein writes 'ἤλωσαν οἱ ἀλόντες, zur Sache c. 213 ff.>'; Macan grumbles that 'the statement here is one of those very hard to stomach' since Greeks would know that there always is a way round a mountain, and suggests that it is an 'apologetic note' by which Herodotus excuses the defeated Greeks; and How-Wells have no comment at all.

Looking at the sentence with a narratological eye, we may observe that we are dealing with two prolepses. In the first place, the narrator, right at the start of the Thermopylae episode, reveals its outcome: the Greeks will be defeated (the prolepsis, as often, is in the past tense: ἤλωσαν οἱ ἀλόντες Ἑλλήνων ἐν Θερμοπύλῃσι). The narrator will recount this defeat in his chapters 7.213–7.233, but his narratees already seem to know how the Greeks are going to be defeated, since he refers to the Anopaea path, even though it is mentioned here for the first time, as 'the (well-known or notorious) path by which the Greeks were trapped and slain'. The function of this prolepsis is to cast a tragic light on all subsequent actions of the Greeks, who are doomed from the start but do not themselves know this (I will come back to this point in section 5). It also mitigates the

12 The verb ἀλίσκομαι in Herodotus, when used of persons, means 'being caught'. Since the Greeks are not just trapped but killed, and in view of the parallel in 7.213.1 (Ephialtes, showing the Anopaea path to Xerxes, διέφθειρε τοὺς ταύτη ὑπομείναντας Ἑλλήνων, 'destroyed the Greeks who stayed there'), I take it here also to have its Homeric meaning of 'being slain' (cf. e.g. *Il.* 17.506). There is one parallel for this combined meaning: in 1.191.6 the narrator refers to the Babylonians who are 'caught and killed' (ἐαλωκότων ... ἐαλωκότας) by the Persians, who invade their city via a channel of the Euphrates.

13 The text is that of Hude (OCT), translations are my own.

(potential) dishonour of defeat by indicating that the Greeks are worsted not because of some lack of courage but because of a treacherous path.

A second prolepsis, linguistically marked by the use of a temporal expression (οὐδὲ ... πρότερον ἢ περ), announces that the Greeks will find out about the path when they arrive in Thermopylae. This is a completing prolepsis<sup>14</sup> in that this moment is not recorded in the main story. In chapter 7.212.2 we simply hear that the Phocians 'were stationed on the mountain in order to guard the path', the moment of the Trachinians telling the Greeks about its existence having been passed over by the narrator. The function of this second prolepsis is to excuse the Greeks for choosing a strategic position which will turn out not to be a watertight one.<sup>15</sup>

### 3 The Analepses about the Phocian Wall

The narrator goes on to describe the Thermopylae pass and mentions a wall next to its natural scenery:

ἐδέδημητο δὲ τείχος κατὰ ταύτας τὰς ἐσβολάς, [...] (4) ἔδειμαν δὲ Φωκέες τὸ τείχος δείσαντες, ἐπεὶ Θεσσαλοὶ ἦλθον ἐκ Θεσπρωτῶν οἰκήσοντες γῆν τὴν Αἰολίδα, τὴν περ νῦν ἐκτέαται. ἄτε δὴ πειρωμένων τῶν Θεσσαλῶν καταστρέφεσθαι σφεας, τοῦτο προεφυλάξαντο οἱ Φωκέες. [...] (5) τὸ μὲν νυν τείχος τὸ ἀρχαῖον ἐκ παλαιοῦ τε ἐδέδημητο καὶ τὸ πλεον αὐτοῦ ἤδη ὑπὸ χρόνου ἔκειτο. τοῖσι δὲ αὐτίς ὀρθώσασι ἔδοξε ταύτη ἀπαμύνειν ἀπὸ τῆς Ἑλλάδος τὸν βάρβαρον.

7.176.3–7.176.5

a wall had been built across that entry, [...] (4) The Phocians had built the wall for fear of the Thessalians, when they came from Thesprotia to dwell in the Aeolian land that they now possess. Because the Thessalians were trying to subdue them, the Phocians used that wall for their protection. [...] (5) The ancient wall had been built long ago and its larger part was already lying in ruins because of the passing of time. The Greeks decided to rebuild it again and at that place keep off the barbarian from Greece.

14 A completing prolepsis (or analepsis) means that the prolepsis recounts an event not recorded in the main story (and hence completes that main story), as opposed to a repeating prolepsis (or analepsis) which recounts an event also recorded in the main story (and hence repeats that main story); see De Jong 2014: 81–82.

15 I thus agree with Macan 1908: ad loc. that this second prolepsis has an apologetic undertone.

Commentators note that the ruins of this wall are still to be seen and further content themselves with a 'cf.' (How-Wells: 'For the wall cf. ch. 7.208, 7.223, 7.225')<sup>16</sup> or an ultra brief comment (Stein: 'ἔκειτο: sie hatte sich als unzureichend erwiesen (c. 215)').

I suggest that much more is to be made of Herodotus' mention of the wall at this moment in his story. The rebuilt wall will play a role in the ensuing battle (chapters 7.223 and 7.225). But why would the narrator take the trouble to recount its history in an analepsis, linguistically marked by pluperfects at the beginning and end (ἐδέδημητο)<sup>17</sup> and past-in-the-past aorists (ἔδειμαν, προεφυλάξαντο)?<sup>18</sup> Perhaps alert narratees would already now sense that there is an analogy between what happened in the past and what is happening in the present of the main story: the Phocians built a wall to keep off invading Thessalians, just as the Greeks now rebuild that wall to keep off invading Persians.

The relevance of what happened in the past becomes clear in a second analepsis, inserted at the moment when Ephialtes betrays the Anopaea path to Xerxes:

τὴν δὲ ἀτραπὸν ταύτην ἐξεύρον μὲν οἱ ἐπιχώριοι Μηλιέες, ἐξευρόντες δὲ Θεσσαλοῖσι κατηγήσαντο ἐπὶ Φωκέας, τότε ὅτε οἱ Φωκέες φράζαντες τείχεϊ τὴν ἐσβολὴν ἦσαν ἐν σκέπη τοῦ πολέμου· ἔκ τε τοσοῦδε κατεδέδεκτο εὐόσα οὐδὲν χρηστὴ Μηλιεῦσι.

7.215

That path had been discovered by local Malians, and having discovered it they had guided the Thessalians against the Phocians, at that time when the Phocians having fenced off the pass with a wall guarded themselves against war. So long ago it [the path] had been shown by the Malians to be pernicious.

This analepsis, linguistically marked by past-in-the-past aorists (ἐξεύρον, κατηγήσαντο), a temporal adjunct (τότε), and a pluperfect (κατεδέδεκτο), primarily concerns the Anopaea path but it also hints at the role of the wall in the ensuing

16 For an excellent discussion of the notoriously vague 'cf.' of commentaries, which in fact can refer to many different things, see Gibson 2002.

17 Cf. Macan 1908: ad loc.: 'one of the most genuine pluperfects, temporally, in Hdt., for it is related not to the date of writing but to the date given in the narrative'. For the pluperfects in the Thermopylae episode, see also the chapter of Tsakmakis in this volume.

18 For the past-in-the past interpretation of the aorist, see Rijksbaron 2002: 20.

events: just as Malians in the past showed the Anopaea path to the Thesalians and thus, it is to be assumed, invalidated the defensive potential of the wall,<sup>19</sup> so now the Malian Ephialtes reveals the path to the Persians and, the narratees understand, will cause the same effect.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, in the final battle the Greeks, at the moment they see the Persians coming down from the path, will withdraw behind the wall but the Persians attacking them in front ‘throw down the defensive wall’ or surround them (7.225) and kill them all. The two analepses about the wall are linked to the main story by analogy, which gives them a foreshadowing force. We see two of the structural devices mentioned in my introduction working in conjunction.

#### 4 The Analepsis about Leonidas’ Kingship

Having set the stage where the battle will take place the Herodotean narrator goes on to list the Greek contingents that await Xerxes, and their generals. The other generals are dealt with in summary fashion (‘all these contingents had their generals, each one his own’), but the commander-in-chief Leonidas is introduced at length:

[...], ὁ δὲ θωμαζόμενος μάλιστα καὶ παντὸς τοῦ στρατεύματος ἡγεόμενος Λακεδαιμόνιος ἦν Λεωνίδης ὁ Ἀναξανδρίδω τοῦ Λέοντος τοῦ Εὐρυκρατίδω [...] τοῦ Ἡρακλέος, κτησάμενος τὴν βασιληίην ἐν Σπάρτῃ ἐξ ἀπροσδοκίτου. (7.205.1) διξῶν γάρ οἱ ἐόντων πρεσβυτέρων ἀδελφεῶν, Κλεομένεός τε καὶ Δωριεός, ἀπελήλατο τῆς φροντίδος περὶ τῆς βασιληίης. [...] οὕτω δὲ ἐς Λεωνίδην ἀνέβαινε ἡ βασιληίη, [...].

7.204–7.205.1

[...], he that was most admired and was the leader of the whole army was the Spartan Leonidas, the son of Anaxandrides, the son of Leon, the son of Eurycratides, [...], the son of Heracles, who had obtained the kingship in Sparta unexpectedly. (7.205.1) For since he had two older brothers, Cleomenes and Dorieus, he had renounced all thought to be-

19 The Herodotean narrator refers again to the Thessalian invasion of Phocis in another analepsis in 8.27–8.28 (cf. ἐσβαλόντες ... ἐς τοὺς Φωκέας), and there it is clear that it was successful.

20 I follow Macan 1908: ad loc. and How & Wells [1912] 1928: ad loc. in taking οὐδὲν χρηστή to mean ‘in no way useful’= ‘pernicious’ and as referring to the path. Stein [1889] 1908: ad loc. takes it as ‘not useful’ and as referring to the pass.

come king. [But both brothers died young.] And so the kingship devolved onto Leonidas, [...].

All commentators note that Herodotus' insertion at this place of Leonidas' long and distinguished genealogy serves as a mark of honour. But why does the narrator include an analepsis about how Leonidas 'unexpectedly' had become king of Sparta, linguistically marked by the push particle γάρ<sup>21</sup> and a pluperfect (ἀπελήλατο)?<sup>22</sup> As so often, the relevance of an analepsis remains implicit and has to be supplied by the narratees themselves. In this case that relevance becomes clear only later, but then is, I think, unmistakable for narratees who are steeped in Herodotus' way of thinking, especially his conviction that human fortune is never stable (cf. for instance 1.5, 1.32). For in chapter 7.220 it will turn out that there was an oracle which prescribed that for Xerxes to be (eventually) stopped, either Sparta or its king, significantly referred to in genealogical terms which recall the present passage (ἄφ' Ἡρακλείους ... γενέθλης ... βασιλῆ), must perish. King Leonidas has no option but to die for his country. Thus, if his succession to the throne at first may have seem an unexpected boon for him, it will later be seen to bring with it grave consequences.<sup>23</sup> Perhaps it is for this reason that we find the imperfect ἐς Λεωνίδην ἀνέβαινε ἡ βασιληίη rather than an aorist, such as we find in a closely similar context: ἀποθανόντος δὲ Δαρείου ἡ βασιληίη ἀνεχώρησε ἐς τὸν παῖδα τὸν ἐκείνου Ξέρξην, 'when Darius died the kingship went over to his son Xerxes' (7.4). The imperfect suggests that we have not heard the last of Leonidas' kingship.<sup>24</sup>

21 See Slings 1997. A push particle is a particle that marks a speaker entering an embedded sequence, as against a pop particle that marks his return to the embedding sequence.

22 This analepsis complements an earlier one at 5.39–5.48, where the narrator had told how the Spartan king Anaxandrides had four sons with two different wives and how the first two (Cleomenes and Dorieus) died. Only now does he tell that it was thus the third son, Leonidas, who unexpectedly became king.

23 A different evaluation of the 'unexpectedly' is given by Baragwanath 2008: 65: 'The story of his succession, displaced from a natural position at 5.41 to 7.204, so as to introduce the Thermopylae narrative, is [...] idealizing: removing Leonidas from the ranks of the many in the *Histories* we have witnessed wrangling egotistically for power, it presents him as one to whom kingship came unexpectedly (ἐξ ἀπροσδοκίτου, 7.204). This in turn heralds the narrative strand portraying Leonidas as servant of his country, which later culminates with the account of his conscious decision—quite Hector- or Achilles-like—to sacrifice himself, in his case for Sparta's sake.' See also the chapter of Tsakmaki in this volume.

24 For the discourse function of the Greek imperfect, which raises expectations that more is to follow, see Rijksbaron 1988. In his response to the oral delivery of this chapter, Rijksbaron pointed out that at 7.4 we find an imperfect as variant reading (ἀνεχώρηε), in my view an inferior reading, since Xerxes' kingship will *not* recur as a topic of discussion.



## 5 The Prolepsis about Ephialtes

The Persians attack the Greek contingents twice and try to force them away from the Thermopylae pass but are not successful. Now Ephialtes enters the scene and reveals the Anopaea path to Xerxes, thus sealing the fate of the Greeks. At this climactic moment the narrator interrupts his story:

ὕστερον δὲ δεισας Λακεδαιμονίους ἔφυγε ἐς Θεσσαλίην, καί οἱ φυγόντι [...] ἀργύριον ἐπεκηρύχθη. χρόνῳ δὲ ὕστερον, κατήλθε γὰρ ἐς Ἀντικύρην, ἀπέθανε ὑπὸ Ἀθηνάδεω ἀνδρὸς Τρηχινίου [...] Ἐπιάλτης μὲν οὕτω ὕστερον τούτων ἀπέθανε.

7.213.2

Later he [Ephialtes] fled to Thessaly, fearing the Spartans, and while in exile a price was put on his head. Much later, having returned to Anticyra, he died by the hand of a Trachinian called Athenades. [...] In such a manner Ephialtes later died.

In this explicitly marked prolepsis (thrice featuring the temporal adjunct ὕστερον) the narrator recounts, at the very moment of his successful intervention with Xerxes, Ephialtes' future fate: he first flees to Thessaly but upon his return home is killed. There are more prolepses in the *Histories* that look ahead to the punishment of characters at the moment they perform their crime or to their death at a moment of triumph.<sup>25</sup> In the present case, there is additional satisfaction in the way Ephialtes will die in that his murderer is attracted by a ransom put on his head, just as Ephialtes himself betrayed the Greeks because he expected, and undoubtedly got, a reward from Xerxes (7.213.1). The narrator might have recounted the later fate of Ephialtes at the end of the Thermopylae passage, when he reports what happened to two Spartans who survived the battle (7.229–7.232). But for someone who is keen on showing the principle of the reversal of fortune at work in history it is of course much more effective to anticipate Ephialtes' end now, at the height of his 'success'.<sup>26</sup>

25 See e.g. 6.66; 6.71–2; 7.7; and 9.37.4–38.1, and Rood 2007: 127.

26 The same device (but with a tragic rather than moralistic undertone) is found in Homer, e.g. *Il.* 16.799–16.800: at the height of Hector's success (the moment he slays Patroclus) the narrator anticipates his imminent death.

## 6 The Analepsis/Prolepsis of the Oracle

The Greeks detect that they are surrounded by the Persians and most of the contingents now decide to leave. Leonidas chooses to stay on the basis of an oracle:

(1) λέγεται δὲ (καὶ) ὡς αὐτός σφεας ἀπέπεμψε Λεωνίδης, μὴ ἀπόλωνται κηδό-  
μενος· αὐτῷ δὲ καὶ Σπαρτιητέων τοῖσι παρεούσι οὐκ ἔχειν εὐπρεπέως ἐκλιπεῖν  
τὴν τάξιν ἐς τὴν ἦλθον φυλάζοντες ἀρχήν. (2) ταύτη καὶ μάλλον τὴν γνώμην  
πλειστός εἰμι· Λεωνίδην, ἐπεῖτε ἦσθετο τοὺς συμμαχούς ἐόντας ἀπροθύμους  
καὶ οὐκ ἐθέλοντας συνδιακινδυνεύειν, κελύσαι σφεας ἀπαλλάσσεσθαι, αὐτῷ δὲ  
ἀπιεῖναι οὐ καλῶς ἔχειν· μένοντι δὲ αὐτοῦ κλέος μέγα ἐλείπετο, καὶ ἡ Σπάρτης  
εὐδαιμονίη οὐκ ἐξηλείφετο. (3) ἐκέχρηστο γὰρ ὑπὸ τῆς Πυθίης τοῖσι Σπαρτι-  
ήτησι χρεωμένοισι περὶ τοῦ πολέμου τούτου αὐτίκα κατ' ἀρχὰς ἐγειρομένου,  
ἢ Λακεδαιμόνα ἀνάστατον γενέσθαι ὑπὸ τῶν βαρβάρων, ἢ τὸν βασιλέα σφείων  
ἀπολέσθαι. (4) [oracle in original hexameters]. ταῦτά τε δὴ ἐπιλεγόμενον  
Λεωνίδην καὶ βουλόμενον κλέος καταθέσθαι μούνων Σπαρτιητέων, ἀποπέμψαι  
τοὺς συμμαχούς μάλλον ἢ γνώμῃ διενειχθέντας οὕτω ἀκόσμως οἴχεσθαι τοὺς  
οἰχομένους.

7.220.1–7.220.4

(1) It is (also) told that Leonidas himself sent them away, because he cared for them not to be killed. But for himself and the Spartans present (he said) it was not seeming to leave the post which they had come to guard in the first place. (2) I am very much of that same opinion. When Leonidas perceived the allies to be faint of heart and not willing to run risks with him, he ordered them to go but (said that) for him to go was not honourable. When he [Leonidas] would stay at his post, great glory would be left behind and the good fortune of Sparta would not be blotted out. (3) For it had been prophesied by the Pythia to the Spartans, when they consulted her about that war right after it had started, that either Sparta would be destroyed by the barbarians or their king would die. [oracle in original hexameters] (4) (It is said that) taking into consideration that oracle and wanting to lay up a store of glory only for the Spartans Leonidas sent away the allies rather than let them go away in disarray because they differed in opinion.

How-Wells write in their commentary:

It is clear that H. in these chapters aims at excusing the allies for deserting Leonidas by explaining that his death was fated by heaven and foretold by

the oracle [...] it was a convenient excuse for all concerned, for the Athenians who had urged pushing forward the line of defence to Artemisium and Thermopylae, for the Spartans who had sent but inadequate support to their heroic king, and for the Peloponnesian allies who had failed him in the hour of trial. But the oracle is plainly a *vaticinium post eventum*.

The idea that the oracle is a *vaticinium post eventum* is embraced by most scholars and this may well be true.<sup>27</sup> But since Herodotus has chosen to present the oracle in his text, we must ask ourselves what its function is within his narrative of Thermopylae.

Let us first take a closer look at how the oracle is presented. In the preceding chapter Herodotus had briefly told how the Greeks, having found out that they are surrounded by the Persians, hold a council in which most allies decide to leave Thermopylae (7.219.2). He now presents an alternative version of that council,<sup>28</sup> which he knows from reported narrators (λέγεται), in which it is Leonidas *himself* who ordered most allies to go away. He emphatically endorses the alternative version (ταύτη καὶ μάλλον τὴν γνώμην πλείστος εἶμι) and then recounts the deliberations of the council once again, now in the new version: when Leonidas sensed that his allies were afraid he ordered them to go but (said) that for him to leave was not honourable. It is not clear whether the ACI-construction Λεωνίδην ... κελεύσαι is the content of the alternative version (that is, depends on λέγεται) or of the narrator's opinion (that is, depends on τὴν γνώμην πλείστος εἶμι), the ambiguity actually expressing how much the two coincide and how much Herodotus endorses that version. In the sentence that follows, 'When he would stay at his post, great glory would be left behind (ἐλείπετο) and the good fortune of Sparta would not be blotted out (ἐξηλείφετο)', the narrator enters Leonidas' mind and tells us what he thought (but did not say: see below). A linguistic argument in favour of this analysis in terms of embedded focalization is the use of the imperfects ἐλείπετο and ἐξηλείφετο: 'So überlegte nach H.'s Meinung der König; daher das Imperfekt' (Stein, followed by Macan).<sup>29</sup>

27 Cf. also Macan 1908: ad loc. and Legrand 1963: 189–190, who contends that the oracle serves to exculpate Leonidas for his decision to sacrifice 300 men.

28 As he does so often, see Groten 1963; Lateiner 1989: 76–90; and Marincola 1997: 280–286.

29 We are dealing with *implicit* embedded focalization when there is no verb of seeing, thinking, feeling, or speaking but the focalization of a character can still be argued on the basis of the presence of evaluative words, particles, or the use of tenses and moods,

The idea that staying at his post would bring Leonidas glory is not strange, but that it also means that 'Sparta's good fortune would not be blotted out' is puzzling. The narrator thus inserts, for the benefit of his narratees, a (completing) analepsis about an oracle that explains Leonidas' reasoning. The analepsis is linguistically marked by the push particle γάρ and the use of a pluperfect (ἐκέχρηστο). It recounts how the Spartans had received an oracle 'at the start of the war', when Xerxes decided to invade Greece,<sup>30</sup> which indicated that either Sparta was to be destroyed or its king had to die since Xerxes would not be stopped before destroying one of the two. At the end of the analepsis the narrator returns to his main story via Leonidas' embedded focalization (ταῦτ' ἀπιλεγόμενον καὶ βουλόμενον ...). In this way he smoothly integrates the analepsis into the story: it begins as a piece of information inserted for the narratees but ends as the content of Leonidas' thoughts.<sup>31</sup> This is a technique often to be observed in the *Histories*: background information is first presented as a kind of analeptic footnote by the narrator but at the end is revealed to be (also) the focalization of one of the characters. In this way potentially digressive elements are firmly integrated into the narrative after all.<sup>32</sup>

Leonidas' embedded focalization *after* Herodotus' presentation of the oracle (7.220.4) largely repeats that *before* it (7.220.2): he wants 'to lay up a store of glory only for the Spartans' (κλέος καταθέσθαι μούνων Σπαρτιητέων ≈ κλέος μέγα ἐλείπετο). In both cases the embedded focalization seems to represent Leonidas' hidden thoughts: he *speaks* about his concern for his allies' life and the Spartan rule never to retreat but he *thinks* of the oracle and the *kleos* it could bring himself and the Spartans.<sup>33</sup>

---

see De Jong [1987] 2004: 102–123. Rijksbaron 2012 amply argues for the use of Greek imperfect as a marker of embedded focalization or, as he calls it, 'substitutionary perception'.

30 In 7.239.1 the narrator again refers to the oracle and indicates that the Spartans solicited it at the moment they heard that Xerxes had decided to march against Greece.

31 Macan 1908: ad loc. gives a genetical analysis: 'ταῦτα ... ἐπιλεγόμενον resumes the construction interrupted by the insertion of the oracle. Perhaps the versified oracle was not in the first draft of Hdt.'s work.'

32 Cf. e.g. 3.34–3.35: 5.89.

33 For the use of embedded focalization to present a character's hidden thoughts in epic, see De Jong 1994. The device is also regularly found in the *Histories*, e.g. 1.10.2. A slightly different take is that of Baragwanath 2008: 69–70: 'Thus Leonidas is presented as motivated in sending the Greek away in part by his care for their own safety and for the survival of Spartan *eudaimonia* (in accordance with his awareness of an oracle dating from the very beginning of the war), but particularly—this is the most insistent theme—by his concern for keeping up appearances.'

Having looked at the oracle's presentation, let us now proceed to discuss the question of why the narrator mentions it *here*. For the ancient historian Matthew, the oracle's position is one more reason to consider it a *vaticinium post eventum*:

If the purpose of Herodotus' narrative was to demonstrate the bravery of Leonidas in marching off to a battle from which he knew he was destined never to return, it is curious that the 'oracle' is not detailed before the king's actual departure from Sparta with the advance force—the time at which he would have heard it *and the most logical, and chronological place* for the passage to sit within the text if it ever actually happened [...] (my italics, IdJ)<sup>34</sup>

His reasoning is that the most logical place for the oracle to be mentioned would have been at the moment when the Spartans heard it, and hence its insertion here, so much later in Herodotus' story and text, exposes it as a later invention.

But what *is* the most logical place for an oracle in the *Histories*? The Herodotean narrator actually has *two* places to present oracles: at the moment when they are *pronounced*, that is, as an event of the main story, or at the moment when they are (about to be) *fulfilled*, as an analepsis. The first method is employed for instance in the case of Croesus and the oracle of the mule: when he is pondering whether to attack the Persians he consults the oracle of Delphi and hears that his reign will last until a mule becomes king of the Persians (1.55). The fulfilment of the oracle follows when Croesus is defeated by Cyrus, the son of a Persian woman and a Median man and hence a hybrid person like a mule (1.84–1.86). We find the second method in the case of the oracle about the deaf-mute son of Croesus who one day will speak, which is presented in an analepsis at the very moment when the boy speaks and the oracle is fulfilled (1.85).

In the case of Leonidas' oracle, too, Herodotus opts for the second method, and thereby turns it into the culmination of a very careful build up. While, as we saw earlier, the narratees are aware of the Spartans' doom right from the start of the Thermopylae episode, Leonidas only gradually realises the predicament he is in. In 7.205.2, he selects three hundred men who already have sons (and the continuity of whose families is hence secured), which indicates that he realises that the mission is going to be a very dangerous one. It is dangerous because the

---

34 Matthew 2013: 84.

Greeks have far less men than the Persians in general and now especially, since a large part of the Spartans and of the Greek allies are still occupied with the Carnean and Olympian festivals. In 7.207, when the Persians have drawn near the pass, the Greeks panic and it is only because the Phocians and Locrians are incensed by the idea of retreat that Leonidas votes to stay, but he sends messengers to ask for more troops, realising that they were 'too few to beat off the Persians'. In 7.209, the Spartans combing their hair is explained by both narrator and the exiled Spartan king Demaratus as indicating that they are ready 'to put their lives at risk' (κινδυνεύειν τῇ ψυχῇ) and 'to slay or be slain' (ὡς ἀπολέμενοι τε καὶ ἀπολέοντες κατὰ δύναμιν). In these three passages the Spartans seriously reckon with the *possibility* that they will die, as is the case in any battle, but they are not *certain* to die, let alone *planning* to die.<sup>35</sup> The turning point comes when they are informed about the Persian circuit via the Anopaea path. Now Leonidas realises that those who stay will certainly die (cf. ἀπέπεμψε Λεωνίδης, μὴ ἀπόλωνται κηδόμενος and Λεωνίδης ἀποπέμπων, ἵνα μὴ συναπόληται σφι) and recalls the oracle that indicates that by dying he could save his city. By presenting the oracle here at this dramatic moment the narrator gives it maximal weight and effect.

So much for the effective presentation of the oracle in a carefully positioned analepsis. But its narrative potential is not yet exhausted. For the oracle also functions as a prolepsis, obviously of Leonidas' death and—perhaps less immediately obviously—of later Greek success (How-Wells speak of an 'omen of future victory'). The oracle, by announcing that Xerxes will be stopped when either Sparta or its king is destroyed, suggests that Leonidas' death will eventually lead to Xerxes' defeat. The narratees can be expected to think of Salamis, where Xerxes himself will be defeated, and especially Plataea, where his general Mardonius will be defeated. In other words, the oracle hints at a connection between the defeat of the Greeks at Thermopylae and their later victories at Salamis and Plataea.

This connection, here only implied, becomes explicit<sup>36</sup> when the Persians have been defeated at Salamis and the Spartans receive another oracle: they are to demand 'retribution for the murder of Leonidas' (δίκας τοῦ Λεωνίδεω φόνου: 8.114.1). They send messengers to Xerxes and demand 'retribution for the murder, because he had killed their king while he was defending Greece' (φόνου δίκας, ὅτι σφέων τὸν βασιλέα ἀπέκτεινας ῥύομενον τὴν Ἑλλάδα: 8.114.1), but

35 For the very different story of Thermopylae as a suicide mission right from the start, see the chapters of Van Wees and De Bakker in this volume.

36 What follows is largely based on Dillery 1996: 242–245 and Asheri 1998, who do not, however, include the oracle at Thermopylae in their discussion.

Xerxes starts laughing and, pointing at his deputy Mardonius who happens to be standing next to him, says:

‘τοιγάρ σφι Μαρδόνιος ὄδε δίκας δώσει τοιαύτας οἷας ἐκείνοισι πρέπει.’  
8.114.2

‘Ok, that is why<sup>37</sup> Mardonius here will give them such retribution as befits them.’

His formulation is ambiguous, thereby becoming oracular itself:<sup>38</sup> Xerxes means that Mardonius will ‘repay’ the Spartans by inflicting another defeat like Thermopylae on them, but the narratees are also able to understand his words as announcing that Mardonius himself will ‘make amends’ to the Spartans by being killed and his troops being defeated at Plataea. This of course is what happens, and after the battle of Plataea the narrator confirms that this Greek victory is the fulfilment of the oracle:

ἐνθαῦτα ἢ τε δίκη τοῦ φόνου τοῦ Λεωνίδεω κατὰ τὸ χρηστήριον τοῖσι Σπαρτή-  
τησι ἐκ Μαρδονίου ἐπετελέετο [...]  
9.64.1

Then the retribution for the slaying of Leonidas was being paid in full to the Spartans by Mardonius according to the oracle [...]

Both the echo of the leitmotiv δίκη τοῦ φόνου (≈ δίκας ... φόνου: 8.114.1 ≈ φόνου δίκας: 8.114.1 ≈ δίκας: 8.114.2) and the analeptic reference to the oracle (κατὰ τὸ χρηστήριον) underscore that Plataea is the Greek revenge for Thermopylae. Shortly after, the Spartan general Pausanias also connects the two battles:

37 The particle *τοιγάρ* is only here found in prose (perhaps in 3.3.3, where some mss. have it instead of *τοιγάρ* *τοι*; I owe this parallel to Mathieu de Bakker). It marks a strong logical connection, usually in reaction to a request; cf. Denniston 1954: 565–566. I take its force to be that *because* Leonidas had died ‘saving Greece’, i.e. (from the Persian point of view) had been resisting him, Mardonius will punish the Spartans. Cf. 8.100.2 where Mardonius says of the Spartans at Thermopylae: *οἱ τε ἡμῖν ἠντιώθησαν, ἔδοσαν δίκας*, ‘those who resisted us, paid a penalty’.

38 See Bowie 2007: 208–208, who calls his words ‘a κληδών, a chance utterance that turns out to be prophetic in a way not intended by the speaker’, and points at the verb *δέκασθαι*, ‘a technical verb for “recognising” an oracular remark’.

‘Λεωνίδη δέ, [...], φημί μεγάλως τετιμωρῆσθαι, ψυχῆσί τε τῆσι τῶνδε ἀναριθμήτοισι τετίμηται αὐτός τε καὶ οἱ ἄλλοι οἱ ἐν Θερμοπύλῃσι τελευτήσαντες.’

9.79

‘As for Leonidas, [...], I hold that he is fully avenged, and he is both himself honoured and all those that died in Thermopylae by the countless souls of these men here.’

The victory at Plataea is thus carefully framed as the Spartans’ revenge for their defeat at Thermopylae. The oracle of Thermopylae (7.220) is the first stage of this framing, suggesting as it does that Leonidas’ death and the defeat of the Spartans form *a necessary prelude to victory*: Xerxes can only be stopped when Leonidas dies. The reasoning here seems to be that the victory at Thermopylae will entice the Persians to continue their invasion of Greece, only to be (twice) defeated and completely annihilated during their long retreat home after those defeats. Herodotus’ narrative strategy brilliantly complements that of the Greeks on the battlefield!

## 7 Conclusion

I have argued that the Herodotean narrator carefully inserts analepses and prolepses at places where they are most effective. They are always relevant to the main story, the connection being of a causal, thematic or analogous nature. The relevance can be made explicitly clear by the narrator or it can remain implicit and then has to be detected by the narratees themselves. And the relevance can be understood right away or only at a later moment.

The prolepsis about the Spartans’ defeat at Thermopylae at the very start of the episode casts a tragic light on all their exertions; the analepsis about the Phocian wall is connected to the main story via analogy and thereby acquires a foreshadowing function; the analepsis about how Leonidas acquired his kingship ‘unexpectedly’ triggers associations with the Herodotean theme of the reversal of fortune and hints that becoming king of the Spartans will have unexpected consequences, as it does when it turns out that it involves dying for his country; the prolepsis about Ephialtes revolves around the central Herodotean theme of retribution and gloatingly anticipates his demise at the very moment of his ‘success’; the oracle is effectively presented as an analepsis at the moment when it is (about to be) fulfilled by Leonidas at Thermopylae and at the same time functions as a prolepsis of Xerxes’ invasion of Greece coming to an end at



Salamis and Plataeae, thus forming part of Herodotus' careful framing of Greek defeat as a prelude to Greek victory.

Herodotus' use of analepses and prolepses is only one aspect of his handling of time in the Thermopylae passage. There is also his effective use of narrative pace, for instance the dramatic scenic rhythm in the final stage of the battle, the Spartans fighting with swords, fists and teeth, and the strategic ellipsis (or non-narration) of their actual slaughter by the Persians at its end (7.225.3). There is the powerful reference to the narrator's own time, when he notes that the Spartans for their final stand withdraw to the hill 'where now ( $\nu\upsilon\nu$ ) stands the stone lion in honour of Leonidas' (7.225.2), pointing out to his narratees a *lieu de mémoire* that they may know from first-hand experience.<sup>39</sup> And there is his consistent association of the setting of the battle, the landscape of Trachis, with the deeds of Heracles in the past (7.176.3; 7.198.2; 7.216), in order to underscore the heroism of Heracles' descendant Leonidas (7.204).

All in all, it is clear that far from being a rambling, archaic or unstoppable storyteller Herodotus knows perfectly well what he is doing. If his narrative does not always offer the kind of exact or reliable information that modern historians would like, it deserves to be taken seriously in and for itself and to be analysed by any modern theory that can help lay bare its subtleties.

## Bibliography

- Asheri, D., 'Plataea vendetta del Termopile: alla origine di un motivo teologico erodotea', in M. Sordi (ed.), *Responsabilità, perdono e vendetta nel mondo antico* (Milan 1998) 65–86.
- Baragwanath, E., *Motivation and Narrative in Herodotus* (Oxford 2008).
- Bowie, A.M., *Herodotus Histories Book vii* (Cambridge 2007).
- Denniston, J.D., *The Greek Particles* ([1934] Oxford 1954).
- Dillery, J., 'Reconfiguring the Past: Thyrea, Thermopylae and Narrative Patterns in Herodotus', *AJPh* 117.2 (1996) 217–254.
- Focke, F., *Herodot als Historiker* (Stuttgart 1927).
- Fränkel, H., 'Eine Stileigenheit der frühgriechischen Literatur', in *Wege und Formen frühgriechischen Denken* ([1924] München 1960) 40–96.
- Fritz, K. von, *Die griechische Geschichtsschreibung* (Berlin 1967).
- Genette, G., *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* ([1972] Ithaca, NY 1980).
- Gibson, R.K., "'Cf. e.g.': a Typology of Parallels and the Role of Commentaries on Latin

39 And which backs up his implicit rejection of the alternative 'Legend' of the Spartans' suicide mission; the point is made by both Van Wees and De Bakker in this volume.

- Poetry', in R.K. Gibson & C.S. Kraus (eds.), *The Classical Commentary. Histories, Practices, Theory* (Leiden 2002) 331–357.
- Gould, J., *Herodotus* (London 1989).
- Grethlein, J., *The Greeks and Their Past: Poetry, Oratory, and History in the Fifth Century BCE* (Cambridge 2010).
- Griffiths, A.H., 'Stories and Story-Telling in the *Histories*', in C. Dewald & J. Marincola (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Herodotus* (Cambridge 2006) 130–144.
- Groningen, B.A. van, *In the Grip of the Past: Essay on an Aspect of Greek Thought* (Leiden 1953).
- Groten, F.J., 'Herodotus' Use of Variant Versions', *Phoenix* 17 (1963) 79–87.
- Hau, L.I., 'Stock Situations, *Topoi* and the Greekness of Greek Historiography', in D. Cairns & R. Scodel (eds.), *Defining Greek Narrative* (Edinburgh 2014) 241–259.
- How, W.W., & Wells, J., *A Commentary on Herodotus*, volume II (Books V–IX) ([1912] Oxford 1928).
- Howald, E., 'Ionische Geschichtsschreibung', *Hermes* 58.2 (1923) 113–146.
- Huber, L., *Religiöse und politische Beweggründe des Handelns in der Geschichtsschreibung des Herodots* (Tübingen 1965).
- Immerwahr, H.R., *Form and Thought in Herodotus* (Cleveland 1966).
- Jacoby, F., 'Herodot', in Pauly-Wissowa-Kroll (eds.), *Realencyklopädie der klassischen Altertumswissenschaft*, Suppl. II (Stuttgart 1913) 205–320.
- Jong, I.J.F. de, *Narrators and Focalizers. The Presentation of the Story in the Iliad* ([1987] London 2004).
- Jong, I.J.F. de, 'Between Word and Deed: Hidden Thoughts in the *Odyssey*', in I.J.F. de Jong & J.P. Sullivan (eds.), *Modern Critical Theory & Classical Literature* (Leiden 1994) 27–50.
- Jong, I.J.F. de, 'The Anachronical Structure of Herodotus' *Histories*', in S.J. Harrison (ed.), *Texts, Ideas and the Classics* (Oxford 2001) 93–116.
- Jong, I.J.F. de, *Narratology and Classics. A Practical Guide* (Oxford 2014).
- Lang, M.L., *Herodotean Narrative and Discourse* (Cambridge 1984).
- Lateiner, D., *The Historical Method of Herodotus* (Toronto 1989).
- Legrand, Ph.-E., *Hérodote Histoires, Livre VII* (Paris 1963).
- Macan, R.W., *Herodotus, the Seventh, Eighth, and Ninth Books with Introduction and Commentary* (London 1908).
- Marincola, J., *Authority and Tradition in Ancient Historiography* (Cambridge 1997).
- Matthew, C.A., 'Towards the Hot Gates: the Events Leading up to the Battle of Thermopylae', in C.A. Matthew & M. Trundle (eds.), *Beyond the Gates of Fire: New Perspectives on the Battle of Thermopylae* (Barnsley 2013) 1–26.
- Munson, R.V., *Telling Wonders: Ethnographic and Political Discourse in the Work of Herodotus* (Ann Arbor 2001).

- Pohlenz, M., *Herodot, der erste Geschichtsschreiber des Abendlandes* (Leipzig 1937).
- Rijksbaron, A., 'The Discourse Function of the Imperfect', in A. Rijksbaron, H.A. Mulder & G.C. Wakker (eds.), *In the Footsteps of Raphael Kühner* (Amsterdam 1988) 237–254.
- Rijksbaron, A., *The Syntax and Semantics of the Verb in Classical Greek. An Introduction* (Amsterdam 2002).
- Rijksbaron, A., 'The Imperfect as the Tense of Substitutionary Perception', in P. da Cunha Correa e.a. (eds.), *Hyperboreans. Essays in Greek and Latin Poetry, Philosophy, Rhetoric and Linguistics* (Sao Paulo 2012) 331–377.
- Romilly, J. de, 'La vengeance comme explication historique dans l'oeuvre d'Hérodote', *REG* 84 (1971) 314–337.
- Rood, A.T., 'Herodotus', in I.J.F. de Jong & R. Nünlist (eds.), *Time in Ancient Greek Literature* (Leiden 2007) 115–130.
- Slings, S.R., 'Adversative Relators between PUSH and POP', in A. Rijksbaron (ed.), *New Approaches to Greek Particles*. Proceedings of the Colloquium held in Amsterdam, January 4–6, 1996, to honour C.J. Ruijgh on the Occasion of his Retirement (Amsterdam 1997) 101–129.
- Stein, H., *Herodotos, vierter Band (Buch VII)* ([1889] Berlin 1908).
- Thomson, J.A.K., *The Art of the Logos* (London 1935).