

FROM ARISTOCRATIC TO DEMOCRATIC IDEOLOGY AND
BACK AGAIN: THE THRASYBULUS ANECDOTE IN
HERODOTUS' *HISTORIES* AND ARISTOTLE'S *POLITICS*

SARA FORSDYKE

THE PERSISTENCE OF THE TERMINOLOGY of aristocratic values under the Athenian democracy has received much attention and elucidation by scholars over the past half century.¹ A central question in the discussion has been whether the use of these terms reflects the continued importance of aristocratic values under the democracy. The consensus appears to be that although the language of aristocratic culture persisted, it was put to new uses under the changed political conditions of the Athenian democracy.² Thus, for example, traditional aristocratic virtues such as ἀρετή were now related to service to and honor from the democracy, and not inborn qualities of a wealth and birth elite.

In this paper, I argue that the Thrasybulus anecdote in Herodotus' *Histories* (5.92.e.2–h.1) provides an ideal ground for observing the adaptation of aristocratic values to the conditions of the Athenian democracy. I shall argue that the Thrasybulus anecdote derives from an aristocratic oral tradition of the Archaic period, yet shows the influence of Athenian democratic ideology of Herodotus' own time. By attempting to trace the stages by which this story was transformed in the oral traditions in which it was passed down, I hope to shed light not only on the process of adaptation of aristocratic values to democratic culture, but also on the nature, language, and symbols of Athenian democratic ideology in the fifth century. In so doing, I hope to show that Herodotus' *Histories* can be used profitably as a source for the ideology of the Athenian democracy.

HERODOTUS AND ORAL TRADITION

It is widely accepted that Herodotus' sources were oral, and that many of the stories that he tells were transmitted orally from the Archaic period, and

1. See Ober 1989, 289–92 for a summary of the debate and bibliography.

2. This view is argued by Ober (cited above) who uses modern political theory on the nature of political discourse to support his view. See also Seager 1982; Raaflaub 1983; Thomas 1989, pp. 213, n. 67, 218; and Whitehead 1983, 1993. Adkins 1960 and 1972 and Carter 1986 trace the tensions between older and newer meanings of certain aristocratic terms. Cf. Loraux 1981, and Austin and Vidal-Naquet 1977 for the view that aristocratic values undermined the new democratic values.

even earlier, to his own period.³ Furthermore, as R. Thomas and others have shown, Herodotus himself wrote in a culture that was still largely oral, and his *Histories* reveal many traces of the influence of current oral traditions.⁴ It is reasonable to infer, therefore, that the Thrasybulus anecdote is one such product of an oral tradition, and that it originated in the Archaic period and was transmitted orally down to the fifth century, when Herodotus heard it. Three principles derived from the study of contemporary oral traditions may therefore be brought to bear upon our analysis of the anecdote.

The most important principle is that oral traditions must have a function in the society in which they exist.⁵ By function, I mean the significance of the content of the oral tradition for that society.⁶ Possible functions are legion, and any given tradition may perform several at once. J. Vansina mentions several common functions of oral traditions that, as will become apparent, are relevant to the Thrasybulus anecdote: (1) the justification of existing conditions; (2) the articulation of group identity; (3) a presentation of an ideal model of the way that a society should function.⁷ For our current purposes, the importance of the principle of the functionality of oral traditions is that it allows us to try to place the origin of the Thrasybulus anecdote in an historical context in which it will have been meaningful and thus have served a social function. Similarly, we may look for a context in the fifth century in which the same anecdote would have been meaningful.

A second feature of oral traditions that will aid an analysis of the Thrasybulus anecdote follows from the first: for a narrative to be meaningful in the society in which it is told, it may have to be adapted as social and historical conditions change.⁸ Traditions that are no longer meaningful or are not adaptable to new conditions are quickly forgotten in oral societies. Since we know that the social and historical conditions of Greece changed quite significantly between the Archaic and Classical periods, we should look for ways in which the anecdote may have been changed to fit the new conditions of the fifth century.

The principle of adaptation, however, presents us with a problem. How are we to surmise the Archaic context in which the anecdote was meaningfully told if we possess only the fifth- and fourth-century versions of the

3. Thomas 1989, p. 4, with references in n. 4; Murray 1987, 93, 95–96; Evans 1991, 89–146; Cobet 1988; and Raaflaub 1988, 219–20.

4. Thomas 1989, 15–94, 238–82, 283–86, and references in note 3 above. Thomas does however point out that Herodotus and Thucydides “made careful and critical use of . . . oral sources” (285) and that Herodotus “was surely well aware of the pitfalls of the patriotic and family traditions” (282). For my own view of the extent to which Herodotus was critical of the oral traditions, see below. Herodotus himself probably performed parts of his *Histories* orally. See Momigliano 1978; Lang 1984; Murray 1987; Evans 1991, 89–146; and Thomas 1992, 123–26.

5. Vansina 1985, 100–114.

6. Cf. Vansina 1985, 100.

7. By enumerating these three functions of oral traditions I do not mean to suggest that such traditions only have political or ideological functions. Besides ideological functions, the Thrasybulus anecdote evidently was told for its entertainment value as a good story illustrating a clever deed. The fact that Periander is one of the Seven Sages demonstrates that he was, in some traditions, admired for his wisdom/cleverness. This may, in part, explain the genesis and preservation of the anecdote. On cleverness as a theme in Greek traditions, see Detienne and Vernant 1978. On the Seven Sages, see Martin 1993.

8. Vansina 1985, 100, 118–19; Thomas 1989, 131, 196, 281.

anecdote, versions that may have been radically changed to fit their new conditions? There is a final feature of oral traditions that will help us here: in the process of adaptation, oral traditions do not lose all features of their origins.⁹ As Vansina puts it: "Social change often leads to additions, not to suppression, leaving older variants intact. Items that tend to be suppressed leave traces."¹⁰ Therefore, the broad features of a tradition may still provide clues to the original social and historical context in which it was told. I shall argue that the basic elements of the Thrasybulus anecdote do in fact reveal the historical conditions in which it originated, even though we have only later versions.

THE THRASYBULUS ANECDOTE

I shall begin with the most basic elements of the story as a way of trying to determine the original context in which such a story might have been told. I then turn to the use of the anecdote in Herodotus' *Histories* to demonstrate the adaptation of the anecdote to Herodotus' own historical circumstances. Following this, I examine Aristotle's retelling of the anecdote in the third book of his *Politics* to show how Aristotle reacts to the fifth-century (Herodotean) version of the anecdote. Aristotle adapts the anecdote in a way that is suited to his own historical context and ideological position. This exercise in tracing the transmission of an anecdote from the Archaic period to the fourth century has implications, therefore, for our understanding not only of how oral traditions work, but also of how oral traditions and written texts interact with one another in a largely oral society. I shall argue that Herodotus was influenced by Athenian oral democratic polis traditions to a greater degree than is usually recognized, and that therefore parts of his *Histories* can be used as a source for the language and themes of Athenian democratic ideology. The Thrasybulus anecdote, I argue, sheds light on the nature of Athenian political debate and ideology in the period of the democracy.

In basic outline, the anecdote runs as follows. Periander sent a messenger to Thrasybulus in order to learn how he might rule Corinth most securely and best (ὄντινα ἂν τρόπον ἀσφαλέστατον καταστησάμενος τῶν πρηγμάτων κάλλιστα τὴν πόλιν ἐπιτροπεύοι). Thrasybulus led the messenger out into a field and proceeded to cut back (ἐκόλουε) and throw away (ἔρριπτε) the ears of grain that stuck out above the rest (τινὰ . . . τῶν ἀσταχύων ὑπερέχοντα). He did this until he had destroyed (διέφθειρε) the most beautiful and tallest (τὸ κάλλιστόν τε καὶ βαθύτατον) part of the crop (τοῦ ληίου). He then sent the messenger back to Periander without saying anything. When the messenger reported Thrasybulus' behavior to Periander, Periander understood that Thrasybulus was advising him to kill the most outstanding citizens (τοὺς ὑπερόχους τῶν ἀστῶν φονεύειν).

One might assume that the origin of the anecdote would be fixed by the presence in the story of the historical figures of Periander of Corinth and Thrasybulus of Miletus who lived in the late seventh and early sixth centuries

9. Vansina 1985, 118–23.

10. Vansina 1985, 122.

B.C.E. However, if we assume, as is most likely, that the story is not based on a historical encounter between these two tyrants, the presence of historical figures in the anecdote provides neither a *terminus post quem* nor a *terminus ante quem*.¹¹ The story could have originated earlier than the time period of these tyrants and have become attached to them only later, as is common with certain folktale motives that become integrated into the traditions about different historical and mythological figures.¹² Furthermore, the story could have been invented at any time after these tyrants lived. Given the importance of tyranny as an ideological figure in the justification of the Athenian democracy, it might seem probable that the story was invented under the democracy as a way of illustrating the injustice of tyrants.¹³ Several features of the story, however, suggest that it originated before the period of the democracy and not after.

The most important feature of the anecdote for placing its origin in a historical context is its imagery. Thrasybulus cut off the ears of grain that stood out above the rest (τινὰ . . . τῶν ἀσταχύων ὑπερέχοντα) and destroyed the most beautiful and tallest (τὸ κάλλιστόν τε καὶ βαθύτατον) parts of the crop. When Periander heard what Thrasybulus had done he understood that he should kill the outstanding citizens (τοὺς ὑπερόχους τῶν ἀστῶν φονεύειν). If this anecdote originated under the Athenian democracy as a way of legitimizing democracy through the negative exemplum of tyrannical rule, then one might expect that the anecdote would show less concern for the tyrant's treatment of his fellow elites and more concern for the effect of the tyrant's rule on the citizen body as a whole.

The centrality of the image of the outstanding ears of grain suggests that the story originated in a context of intra-aristocratic strife for political power such as we find in many poleis in the Archaic period.¹⁴ The accounts of the violent struggle between Myrsilus, Pittacus, and Alcaeus and his brothers in Mytilene in the seventh century provide a vivid example of the nature of this political struggle in the Archaic period. Myrsilus and Pittacus both gained tyrannical power by banishing ("removing") rival aristocrats from the polis. The history of Athens similarly provides many examples of violent intra-aristocratic strife that resulted in the removal or slaughter of the losing faction. The Cylonian conspiracy, the rivalry between Pisistratus, Megacles, and Lycurgus, and the struggle between Cleisthenes and Isagoras are all illustrative of the struggle for political power among elites in the pre-democratic period. The Thrasybulus anecdote with its imagery of a tyrant cutting down and throwing away his sociopolitical peers seems to reflect the

11. The assumption that this story is not based on an historical encounter between these two tyrants is not the same as saying that it is not based on historical experience of the group that composed the story (indeed I am arguing this very point). The story represents the group's experience in a dramatic and striking (more "story-like") way that does not directly correspond with historical experience.

12. Cf. Herodotus' accounts of the rise of Cyrus, Cypselus, and Pisistratus to power, where Herodotus' narratives follow a familiar pattern of divine portent predicting the greatness of an unborn child, attempts by the existing powers to destroy the child, and the child's eventual rise to greatness. For the principle that older legends may become attached to newer historical figures in oral traditions, cf. Lord 1970 and Drews 1974.

13. For the role of the image of the tyrant in democratic ideology cf. Lanza 1977; Bleicken 1979, 157; Raaflaub 1983, 522–23; Giorgini 1993, 16–38; 142–86; McGlew 1993, 183–212.

14. See Osborne 1997 for an overview of the political struggle between aristocrats in the Archaic period.

intra-aristocratic strife that gave rise to tyrannies in many Archaic poleis in the late seventh and sixth centuries B.C.E. The verbs κολούειν, ῥίπτειν, διαφθείρειν and φονεύειν reflect the violence of this struggle for power.

If it is agreed that the imagery and content of the Thrasybulus anecdote reflect the conditions of the Archaic poleis and that therefore the anecdote probably originated in this time period, we may ask what function the anecdote played in this context. By whom was it told? Why was it told and what did it mean? The anecdote represents the injustice of tyrants towards fellow aristocrats and therefore presumably originated among the ruling aristocrats who felt themselves threatened by the attempts of fellow aristocrats to secure exclusive power for themselves. The anecdote probably served as a way of validating rule by a coalition of aristocrats (such as we know to have existed in many poleis of the Archaic period) by suggesting that the supremacy of any single aristocrat would result in the elimination of the rest from the community and from power. The anecdote may have circulated among aristocrats as a way of strengthening group solidarity against attempts at tyrannical power, in much the same way as the poems of Solon and Theognis, which contain warnings about the dangers of tyranny, may have functioned in the aristocratic social groups of Archaic Greece.¹⁵

If this reconstruction of the origins and meaning of the anecdote is correct, then we may ask why it continued to be told in the changed historical conditions of the Classical period, when Herodotus heard it. Was it merely an historical artifact, a good story reflecting aristocratic experience and antityrannical ideology but no longer relevant to the new conditions? What we know of the way oral traditions work, namely that they tend to slough off or de-emphasize elements that cease to have meaning, leads us to suspect differently.

We might expect that this anecdote could be transferred unchanged to the context of the Athenian democracy, where tyrants were repudiated as much as they had been by certain aristocratic groups in the Archaic period.¹⁶ A story illustrating the injustice and brutality of a tyrant, one might surmise, would tend to reinforce democratic group solidarity regardless of the particular victims of the tyrant's brutality. The use to which Herodotus puts this anecdote in his *Histories*, however, shows that the democracy did not simply adopt the anecdote wholesale into its own ideology, but adapted it to fit the new context. One of the most striking adaptations of the anecdote to democracy was to ignore the imagery of the tallest ears of grain and to re-interpret the anecdote as signifying the harmfulness of tyranny to the citizen body as a whole. Under the democracy, therefore, the anecdote came to

15. On aristocratic symposia and public festivals as the social milieux in which elegiac poetry was performed, and on the importance of these occasions in strengthening aristocratic group solidarity, see Bowie 1986; Figueira and Nagy 1985; Stehle 1997; Thomas 1992, 120–21; and Schmidt-Pantel 1990. Similarly, an Archaic law on tyranny as preserved in *Ath. Pol.* 16.10 may be interpreted as an attempt by ruling aristocrats to strengthen group solidarity against potential tyrants.

16. See note 13 above. The image of the tyrant presumably also played a role in the legitimization of nonmonarchical, nondemocratic regimes such as oligarchies, as perhaps is attested by the assent of Megabyzus, a proponent of oligarchy, to the criticisms of tyranny given by Otanes in the "Constitutional Debate" at Hdt. 3.81.

signify the injustice of tyranny against the δῆμος, thereby strengthening the solidarity of the democracy through specific reference to the harm to the δῆμος. The anecdote, therefore, has a different function as retold by Herodotus. Instead of creating aristocratic solidarity against actual tyrants through reference to a tyrant's effect on aristocrats, it now creates democratic solidarity through reference to the tyrant's effect on the δῆμος (unhistorical though this may be).

The context in which Herodotus deploys the anecdote in his *Histories* signals the shift in the anecdote's meaning under the new political conditions. In the *Histories*, the anecdote is told by a Corinthian named Socles in an effort to dissuade the Spartans from their proposal to overthrow the newly founded Athenian democracy. Thus the context is that of a defense of the Athenian democracy. Socles employs the tactic of describing the evils of tyranny to persuade the Spartans that their proposal to establish a tyranny at Athens is ill advised. Socles describes the tyranny of Cypselus and Periander at Corinth and uses the story of Periander's encounter with Thrasybulus as a central example of the manner in which tyrants rule. What is most significant, however, for our understanding of the meaning of the anecdote in Herodotus' *Histories*, is the way that Herodotus represents Periander as "reading" and responding to the Thrasybulus anecdote.

As I have already indicated, the imagery of the anecdote suggests that tyrants suppress their aristocratic rivals but leave the mass of citizenry unharmed. Herodotus, however, suggests that Periander violently suppressed the citizen body as a whole in response to Thrasybulus' advice. Herodotus has Socles describe the rule of Periander's father, Cypselus, before describing the effect of Thrasybulus' advice on Periander. Herodotus describes Cypselus' rule in an ascending rhetorical tricolon in which each colon represents an act of violence against the Corinthian citizen body (5.92.e.2):

πολλοὺς μὲν Κορινθίων ἐδίωξε, πολλοὺς δὲ χρημάτων ἀπεστέρησε, πολλῶ δέ τι πλείστους τῆς ψυχῆς.

He drove many Corinthians into exile, and he confiscated the property of many, but mostly he killed people.

Similarly, when Periander was informed of Thrasybulus' action and understood that he was being advised to kill the outstanding citizens, Periander (5.92.h.1):

performed every sort of misdeed (πᾶσαν κακότητα) against the citizens (ἐς τοὺς πολίτας). For he finished off (ἀπετέλεσε) whatever Cypselus had left behind in the way of killing (κτείνων) and banishing (διώκων)

The contrast between Periander's initial understanding of the meaning of Thrasybulus' act ("to kill the outstanding citizens" [τοὺς ὑπερόχους τῶν ἀσπῶν φονεύειν]) and his subsequent action towards the Corinthian citizens as described by Socles points up the shift in significance—or "slippage"—between the meaning of the anecdote as told in the context of Archaic politics and its meaning as told in the political conditions of Herodotus' time. Herodotus emphasizes the harmful effect of tyranny on the entire citizen

body, an adaptation of the anecdote to the political conditions of the democracy, where concern for the citizen body as a whole replaced the concern of aristocrats to maintain their power against potential tyrants. Thus, the shift in meaning of the anecdote from its Archaic origins to its deployment in the *Histories* is marked not only by the context in the *Histories* of the question of the survival of the newly established Athenian democracy, but also by Herodotus' explicit reinterpretation of the anecdote as signifying the harmful effect of tyranny on the entire citizen body and not just "those who stood out above the rest." By using the adjectives πολλούς and πλείστους, as well as the categories "the Corinthians" and "the citizens" (τοὺς πολίητας), Herodotus suggests that tyrants harm the citizen body, the δῆμος.¹⁷

Since the anecdote seems not to have been passed down in fixed (e.g., metrical) form, there would have been a great deal of lexical flexibility in the tradition. If my interpretation of Herodotus' use of the anecdote is correct, then two puns in Herodotus' version of it become significant. Herodotus' use of ἄσταχυς instead of the more usual στάχυς is a pun on the word for townsperson/citizen, ἀστός, as is noted by Shimron.¹⁸ Similarly, his use of the word λήιον for crop, instead of the more usual ἄρουρα (which he also uses), is perhaps a pun on the word for people, λαός (Ionic λῆός). Herodotus' use of these puns may emphasize the common people as the victims of the tyrant's brutality, thus de-emphasizing the image of the tallest ears of grain. The significance of Herodotus' choice of words seems to be confirmed by Aristotle's version of the anecdote (see below), where στάχυς is used instead of ἄσταχυς and ἄρουρα instead of λήιον. This alteration fits Aristotle's use of the anecdote, which is different from Herodotus' use, as I discuss below.

Two further points may be made concerning Herodotus' use of the anecdote. First of all, the anecdote seems ill suited as part of an argument to persuade the Spartans not to restore the tyranny in Athens. The anecdote illustrates the potentially harmful effect of tyrannical rule on the citizens of Athens. Since Herodotus explicitly tells us that the reason the Spartans wanted to restore the tyranny to Athens was that they were concerned about the growing strength of Athens (5.91.1), it seems unlikely that the Spartans would be concerned about the harmful effect that tyranny would have on the Athenian citizen body. Indeed, according to Herodotus, the Spartans wished a tyranny on the Athenians in order to weaken Athens in this very way (5.91.1). The fact that Socles uses the argument of a connection between tyranny and civic weakness to dissuade the Spartans suggests that historical realism is not important to Herodotus, or to the tradition from which he learned the story. Rather, the tradition aims at presenting the evils of tyranny in contrast to the beneficial effects of democratic rule (cf. 5.78).¹⁹ This

17. Note that Periander's first specific action, as reported by Socles, was to strip the clothes off "all the wives of the Corinthians" (πάσας τὰς Κορινθίων γυναῖκας). Besides illustrating one of the standard injustices of tyrants as described in the Constitutional Debate (3.80.5), this seems to confirm that all the Corinthians, not just the elite citizens, were victims of the tyrant's injustice in Herodotus' version.

18. Shimron 1989, 61.

19. In fact, this whole passage, including the Spartans' initial speech justifying their attempt to restore the tyranny to Athens, is thoroughly colored by the assumption of a relation between tyranny and civic

conclusion further suggests that Herodotus' source for this story was not Spartan or Corinthian traditions, but an Athenian democratic tradition that was concerned to validate democratic rule through reference to the harmful effects of tyranny on the citizen body.

Socles, moreover, is successful in persuading Sparta's allies not to help Sparta to restore the tyranny, and therefore Sparta is forced to abandon its proposal. The success of Socles' argument has the effect of validating Socles' criticism of tyrannical rule and indirectly of validating the Athenian democracy. Thus Herodotus deploys the anecdote in such a way as to reinforce the justice and legitimacy of democratic rule. In Herodotus' reinterpretation of the anecdote, therefore, its original significance for aristocratic values and ideology is modified to meet the new needs of the historical context in which he is writing, namely that of the height of the Athenian democracy.

We may ask at this point whether Herodotus himself is responsible for adapting the Thrasybulus anecdote to the ideological needs of the Athenian democracy or whether the anecdote had already become integral to democratic polis traditions by the time Herodotus encountered it. Here we come face-to-face with the tricky question of how greatly Herodotus modified or put to new uses the oral traditions that he encountered in composing his *Histories*. Some features of the *Histories* reveal patterning that is clearly part of Herodotus' own methods of composition;²⁰ yet Herodotus must have been influenced also by the ways in which the oral traditions themselves organized and represented the past. I suggest that Herodotus was influenced by democratic polis traditions in composing Socles' speech in the *Histories*, and specifically that he was influenced by the link between tyranny and the "wasting" of the civic body that was a dominant theme in such traditions.²¹ Whether or not Herodotus was the first to adapt the Thrasybulus anecdote to this theme cannot be determined. What we can say is that after Herodotus' time, this anecdote appears to have played a central role in the ideological justification of democratic rule. This becomes clear from Aristotle's use of the anecdote in the *Politics* which, I argue, shows that Aristotle was reacting to the use of the anecdote in democratic polis traditions.

Aristotle mentions the Thrasybulus story in a discussion of how political power is to be allocated in a polis, in which there are individuals and groups who are superior to others in terms of wealth, birth, goodness, and strength (1282b14–1284b34). Although Aristotle cannot concede the right of these

weakness that seems to serve Athenian democratic ideology rather than Spartan interests. It is therefore unlikely that this account derives from Spartan traditions about this event. See Gray 1997 for a discussion of the connection between tyranny and civic weakness in this passage.

20. For patterning in Herodotus' *Histories*, see, for example, Immerwahr 1966 and Lateiner 1989, esp. chap. 8.

21. See Gray 1996 on this theme in the *Histories*. Although the theme seems to be prominent in contexts in Herodotus' *Histories* that are not connected explicitly with the Athenian democracy, the context of the Thrasybulus anecdote and Aristotle's use of it (see below) show that it was the Athenian democracy that promulgated this version of the theme. I am not claiming that the Athenian democracy was the only political system to use the image of the tyrant and the notion that a tyrant harms the citizen body to legitimate itself, but only that this episode suggests an Athenian source.

groups to greater political power, he does make an exception for men of outstanding virtue. These men cannot be treated equally with others since equal treatment would be unjust for men of superior virtue (1284a3–17). In the best constitution, a man of outstanding virtue must be made king and obeyed by all (1284b25–34). In deviant forms of constitution (such as a democracy), men of outstanding virtue must be excluded so as not to violate the principles of the constitution or fairness to the outstanding individual (1284a3–17). This, Aristotle argues, is why democracies ostracize individuals; in a polis in which equality is the aim, it is necessary to remove those who are outstanding in power (1284a17–22). Aristotle continues (1284a26–37):

Hence those who blame tyranny (τοὺς ψέγοντας τὴν τυραννίδα) and the advice of Periander to Thrasybulus are not to be thought wholly right in their censure.²² For they say that Periander said nothing to the messenger who was sent to him for advice, but, by removing (ἀφαιρῶντα) the ears of grain that stood out (τοὺς ὑπερέχοντας τῶν σταχύων), levelled (ὀμαλῶναι) the field (τὴν ἄρουραν). The messenger did not understand the meaning of this, but when he reported it to Thrasybulus, Thrasybulus understood that it was necessary to get rid of the outstanding men (τοὺς ὑπερέχοντας ἄνδρας ἀναιρεῖν). This action is not only expedient for tyrants, however, and not only tyrants do this, but also oligarchies and democracies. For ostracism has the same effect: to cut down (τῷ κολοῦειν) the outstanding men (τοὺς ὑπερέχοντας) and to exile them (φυγαδεύειν).

Several aspects of Aristotle's version of the anecdote are noteworthy. First of all, in drawing a parallel with the democratic procedure of ostracism, Aristotle revalidates the imagery of the anecdote in which it is the outstanding ears of grain that were the victims of the tyrant's act, and not the citizen body as a whole, as Herodotus interprets the anecdote. According to Aristotle's rereading of the anecdote, tyrants remove the outstanding citizens (τοὺς ὑπερέχοντας ἄνδρας ἀναιρεῖν) in a manner similar to the democracy's use of ostracism where "those who seem to stand out in power (τοὺς δοκοῦντας ὑπερέχειν δυνάμει)" are banished (1284a17–22). According to Aristotle, "ostracism has the same effect" as tyrants have, namely "to cut down the outstanding men and to exile them." In addition to refocusing attention on the elites as the victims of the tyrant's brutality and thereby strengthening the parallel with the democratic procedure of ostracism, Aristotle adds his own modification to the imagery by using the verb ὀμαλῶναι (to level) to describe Periander's action. By drawing attention to the level crop left behind by the tyrant, Aristotle similarly strengthens the parallel with the democratic procedure of ostracism, since the aim of democracy is equality among citizens.

Aristotle, interestingly, is not wholly critical of the principle of removing outstanding citizens from the community, although he does believe that law-givers should construct the constitution in the first place so that they have no need of such measures (1284b17). Aristotle makes the point that it may be expedient for all types of constitution, both the deviant forms, such as tyranny and democracy, and correct forms such as kingship, to remove

22. Note that Aristotle reverses the name of advisor and advisee, a variation that shows that the anecdote was transmitted not for its historical significance, but rather its ideological significance.

outstanding citizens from the polis (1284b3–20). What is important is whether this is done in the interests of the community as a whole or for private interests. Ostracism, Aristotle states, was in fact used for private reasons in factional disputes and not for the good of the community (1284b21–22).

Aristotle's use of the Thrasybulus anecdote is complex, involving both an acknowledgement of the occasional justice of removal of outstanding citizens and a condemnation of the actual use of ostracism by the democracy. What is most important for our analysis is that the anecdote plays a central role in Aristotle's discussion of the allocation of political power in a polis. Moreover, Aristotle takes issue with the customary use of the anecdote ("those who blame tyranny and Periander's advice"). The fact that he uses the example of democratic ostracism to dispute this use of the anecdote suggests that it was democrats who customarily used the anecdote to justify democratic rule. Thus Aristotle's discussion shows that the Thrasybulus anecdote played a central role in democratic ideology even as late as Aristotle's time. Aristotle, however, argues that the customary use of the anecdote by democrats is unjustified since the democrats themselves engage in similar behavior through their use of ostracism.

Aristotle's use of the Thrasybulus anecdote in his *Politics* suggests that the anecdote was alive and well in oral democratic polis traditions of his day. I have already argued that Herodotus was influenced by democratic polis traditions in the use to which he put the anecdote in his *Histories*. Similarly, Aristotle appears to be responding to the use of the anecdote in the dominant democratic ideology of his time. The examination of the use of this anecdote in these works shows that there was no neat division between oral tradition and written composition in the time when these authors composed their works. Each engages in dialogue with the oral traditions of his culture, and the writings of each reflect this engagement. Thus Herodotus' *Histories* and Aristotle's *Politics* are two examples of how ancient literature may shed light on the nature of the orally transmitted debates and ideologies of the societies in which they were composed.

CONCLUSION

Analysis of the Thrasybulus anecdote as a product of an oral tradition that originated in the Archaic period and lasted until at least the time of Aristotle allows us to see the steps by which aristocratic language and symbols were adapted to the conditions of the Athenian democracy. The image of the tyrant that developed in the Archaic period was adapted to the conditions of the Athenian democracy by de-emphasizing the tyrant's treatment of his fellow aristocrats and adding new elements illustrating the tyrant's treatment of the entire citizen body (δῆμος). In this way, the image of the tyrant served as a negative exemplum in the ideological justification of the Athenian democracy in a way similar to its validation of rule by a coalition of aristocrats in the Archaic period. The colorfulness of the image of the tyrant cutting down the ears of grain and the cleverness of both Thrasybulus and Periander in encoding and deciphering the message no doubt contributed to the longevity

of the tradition. I contend, however, that the ideological significance of the story for the groups among whom it was told and the adaptability of the story to new social and political conditions were key factors in the transmission of the anecdote from the Archaic period to Herodotus' own time.²³

University of Michigan

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