

Style of Herodotus: Battle of Marathon

(Andrew) Byung Kyu Park

May 9, 2006

In the passage about the battle of Marathon, Herodotus describes the dilemma facing the generals, to attack or not to attack the Persian army. Miltiades, as one of the generals for the attack, sets about to persuade Callimachus, the war archon, to his cause. In his speech, the two opinions are contrasted; in this contrast and the style in which it is presented, we catch a glimpse of what Herodotus thought to be the best action, as well as his implicit faith in democracy. In the narrative, we will also see such a change of mood as to convince the audience that what the generals chose to do is the best course of action.

Τοισι δε Αθηναίων στρατηγοισι εγινοντο διχα αι γνωμαι, των μεν ουκ εωντων συμβαλειν (ολιγους γαρ ειναι στρατιη τη Μηδων συμβαλειν), των δε και Μιλτιάδεω κελευοντων.

For the generals of Athenians, the opinions were divided in two, with some not allowing the army to attack (for they were too few to attack the army of Medes), others and especially Miltiades urging an attack.

Here, “*διχα αι γνωμαι*” is delayed until the end of the clause for emphasis. In this way, Herodotus tells us the crux of the dilemma: the generals could not agree on one course of action. The order in which the two opinions are presented, and how they are presented is important. First, they are presented so that Miltiades is mentioned at the very end, so that it is fresh on the audience’s mind, as the narrative continues. Second, the opinion first expressed only gets a parenthetical explanation (that the Persians hold the numerical superiority), which turns out to be the only support expressed for the opinion dissuading the attack, and being conveniently located in the middle of the sentence, it is as de-emphasized as possible.

Lastly, we note in passing that “*συμβαλλειν*” is repeated, although such repetition was not necessary.

ως δε διχα τε εγινοντο και ενικα η χειρων των γνωμεων, ενθαυτα, ην γαρ ενδεκατος ψηφιδοφορος ο τω κυαμω λαχων Αθηναιων πολεμαρχειν (το παλαιον γαρ Αθηναιοι ομοψηφον του πολεμαρχου εποιουντο τοισι στρατηγοισι), ην δε τοτε πολεμαρχος Καλλιμαχος Αφιδναιος, προς τουτου ελθων Μιλτιαδης ελεγε ταδε·

When the opinions were divided in two and the weaker of them was winning, then, for there was an eleventh voter, the one who was chosen by lot to be the war archon of the Athenians (for in the old time Athenians made the war archon have an equal vote with the generals), and at that time Callimachus of the deme Aphidna. Miltiades went to him and spoke the following.

Herodotus simply tells us that weaker of the opinions is winning but does not tell us precisely which opinion it was. In this way, he assumes the appearance of letting his audiences come to their own conclusions about these two opinions, perhaps guided by his hints along the way.

In his choice of words such as “ψηφιδοφορος”, Herodotus tells us what kind of decision making process governs the Athenian generals. That is, at Athens, military decisions, like the non-military ones, are made democratically. Even more revealing is that war archon is ομοψηφον as the generals, being neither above nor below them in authority. By these choices of political words, Herodotus draws a sharp distinction between the army of Athenians and the army of Persians, where decisions are made by the king alone, perhaps with help of advisors, but in the very end, where the final decision rests with the king.

The appearance of the war archon is emphasized by the marker word “ενθαυτα”. When the audience hears that he is the eleventh vote-casting member, they expect the crucial tie-breaking vote from him; Miltiades goes to seek his support without losing a moment, as the asyndeton after the mention of Callimachus signifies.

Εν σοι νυν, Καλλιμαχε, εστι η καταδουλωσαι Αθηνas η ελευθερας ποιησαντα μνημοσυνα λιπεσθαι ες τον απαντα ανθρωπων βιον οια ουδε Αρμοδιος τε και Αριστογειτων.

“In you now, Callimachus, it is possible either to enslave Athens or making her free to leave memorials for all the life of men, such a kind that not even either Harmodios or Aristogeiton could.”

Miltiades’ speech is in direct quotation—in fact, all the speeches in this passage are in direct

quotation. In this way the speeches seem more authoritative and have a sense of urgency and action. First it carries an authoritative voice, since Herodotus does not—and, indeed, cannot, as long as he uses direct quotation—add notes such as “Greeks say this” or “It is said”, as he usually does in other passages when he tells a story that he doesn’t believe himself. By using direct quotes, he presents these speeches as actual events that he knows to have happened. Secondly it adds urgency and action since, in direct speech, the verbs are in indicative or imperative mood in present tense, so that the audience perceives it as an event happening now not a past event that is merely being described now.

Now, Miltiades begins the speech with “In *you*”, to signal to Callimachus how important his decision will be for the whole people of Athens. By doing this, he sets up Callimachus to listen to him with all the care and all his attention. Having drawn the attention to himself, Miltiades offers Callimachus two choices: To enslave Athens or to make her free, and as he presents these outcomes, note how contrasted they are: on the first choice, which is clearly undesirable, he uses mere two words “καταδουλωσαι Αθηνας” to describe it. Having dealt with the undesirable choice as quickly as possible, then he goes onto the next outcome and elaborates on it, as to give Callimachus even further incentives to make the right choice.

Note how in the second choice, we have a subtle anacoluthon, as “ελευθερας ποιησαντα”, the logical counter part to “to enslave Athens” is expressed with a participle, rather than an infinitive. And as the grammatical parallel to the first infinitive, we have “μνημοσυνα λιπεσθαι”. This device is meant to bring emphasis on the more practical and more glorious consequence of the right choice: that Callimachus will leave his name to the end of histories, one that even the renowned heroes of Athens, those who made Athens free in the first place, could not achieve.

Here, we might also note in passing that Herodotus uses the plural word “memorials”, when a singular word “memorial” may be more accurate, and that he compares Callimachus to two men, rather than just one man.

*νυν γαρ δη, εξ ου εγενοντο Αθηναιοι, ες κινδυνου ηκουσι μεγιστου, και ην μεν γε υποκυψωσι
τοισι Μηδοισι, δεδοκται τα πεισονται παραδεδομενοι Ιππιη, ην δε περιγενηται αυτη η
πολις, οη τε εστι πρωτη των Ελληνιδων πολιων γενεσθαι.*

“For now indeed, since the time Athenians existed, they have come into the greatest danger, and if, at least, they bow to the Medes, it has been decided what things they will suffer, having been handed over to Hippias, but if the city itself prevails it is possible to be the first of Greek cities.”

And now Miltiades gives the justification for saying that it is possible for Callimachus to leave a memorial, such a kind that Harmodios or Aristogeiton could not leave: For, if the Athenians suffer a defeat to the Persians now, Persians will install Hippias as the tyrant again, and the expulsion of sons of Pisistratus would have become nothing, and the works of Harmodios and Aristogeiton would have come to nothing. Here again, the name of Hippias, which conjures fear and hatred in the minds of Athenians, is delayed until the end of the clause for the maximum effect—that is, the audience, including Callimachus, hear this name after being told the fatality of their defeat at Marathon, to add fear onto despair.

The above construction is the prime example of use of $\mu\epsilon\nu$ - $\delta\epsilon$ construction to contrast the two sides: If the $\mu\epsilon\nu$ clause offered the grimmest view of present affairs, the $\delta\epsilon$ clause presents the brightest view of present affairs, where Athenians will not only survive the attack but become the first city of the whole Greece, as the result of surviving this attack.

At this point, special attention to the order in which these choices and consequences have been offered is deserved. In the narrative prior to the speech of Miltiades, the choice not to attack was presented first, then the choice to attack was presented later. At the beginning of his speech, Miltiades mentions the enslavement of Athens first, then the continued freedom of Athens later. And now, he expresses the fear of return of the tyrant first, then the prominence to which Athens would rise later. The choices and the outcomes have been offered in these consistent order for the benefit of the audience—as a hint for which of the opinions is the weaker one.

*κως ων δη ταυτα οια τε εστι γενεσθαι, και κως ες σε τοι τουτων ανηκει των πρηγματων
το κυρος εχειν, νυν ερχομαι φρασων.*

“Therefore indeed how these things can be, and how possession of authority of these matters has come up to you, in truth, now I am going to explain.”

Miltiades made grand claims in the previous two sentences. Now, to ward off incredulousness

on the part of Callimachus, he acknowledges the possible doubts with emphatic particle “δη” and “τοι”, with the emphasis on “these things”, that Athens can become the first city of all Greece, and “to you”, that accomplishing all these things is up to Callimachus alone. These words hold emphasis also by their position right after “κως”. Since Callimachus may have had doubts about these when Miltiades spoke of them, *now* he is going to explain it.

ημεων των στρατηγων εοντων δεκα διχα γινονται αι γνωμαι, των μεν κελουτων συμβαλειν,
των δε ου.

“Because we have ten generals, the opinions have become divided in two, some encouraging to attack, and others not.”

The five words “δεκα διχα γινονται αι γνωμαι” are worth noting, first in their juxtaposition: δεκα is placed as close as possible to “opinions have become divided in two”. This even lends a causal force to the participle: that the opinions have become divided *because* there were ten Athenian generals. After all, considering that the Persian army is considerably larger and has only two generals, the Athenian army has a rather large number of generals. These particular words also draw attention by parechesis, with first two words ending in α and the last three words ending in the diphthong αι.

Note how Herodotus borrows the voice of Miltiades to repeat the points he made just at the beginning of the passage, making the repetition apparent by the parallel structure of the sentence, while adding an extra detail.

We mention in passing for the second time the reappearance of the word συμβαλλειν. We also mention in passing that the order in which two choices are presented has been reversed.

ην μεν νυν μη συμβαλωμεν, ελπομαι τινα στασιμ μεγαλην διασεισειν εμπεισουσαν τα
Αθηναιων φρονηματα ωστε μηδισαι. ην δε συμβαλωμεν πριν τι και σαθρον Αθηναιων
μετεξετεροισι εγγενεσθαι, θεων τα ισα νεμοντων οιοι τε ειμεν περιγενεσθαι τη συμβολη.

“If we do not attack now, I expect that some great strife falling on the minds of Athenians will shake violently that they medize; but if we attack before even something unsound happens to certain people among Athenians, if gods dispense justice, we are able to prevail by means of the attack.”

In the $\mu\epsilon\nu$ clause, “medize” is delayed until the end for emphasis. This word would have struck close to home in an Athenian mind, having heard the news regarding the Eretrians and how the city fell—because, with the siege, a medizer betrayed the city. This would have made the strongest argument against not attacking the Persians, and indeed, the keyword “ $\mu\epsilon\delta\iota\sigma\alpha\iota$ ” is set apart for emphasis.

In the $\delta\epsilon$ clause, the present tense $\epsilon\iota\mu\epsilon\nu$ is used instead of future. The present tense carries more vividness than future, and it makes a more forceful assertion as well. Even more striking detail in the $\delta\epsilon$ clause is how many times “ $\sigma\upsilon\mu\beta\alpha\lambda\lambda\epsilon\iota\nu$ ” is repeated in different forms. The economy of the Greek language allows that the verb does not need to be repeated, but Herodotus chooses to repeat it, and not only does he repeat the verb, he repeats the same word at the end, saying “the city is able to survive by attacking”, when “the city is able to survive” would have carried the same meaning.

In this sentence Miltiades puts the description of what would happen if they do not attack first, and what would happen if attack later. This forms a chiasmus with the previous sentence, and in turn, this will also form a chiasmus with the next sentence as well. In this chiasmus, the focus of the argument—the benefits of attacking contrasted with the harms of not attacking—shifts from one to the other rhythmically, allowing for a natural flow of arguments, which does not overwhelm the audience with too much detail of the disadvantages or advantages all at once, nor does it too quickly and too rigidly change the focus from one course of action to the another, as it would have been if the same order was kept throughout.

*ταυτα ων παντα ες σε νυν τεινει και εκ σεο αρτηται· ην γαρ συ γνωμη τη εμη προσθη, εστι
τοι πατρις τε ελευθερη και πολις πρωτη των εν τη Ελλαδι· ην δε την των αποσπενδοντων
την συμβολην ελη, υπαρξει τοι των εγω κατελεξα αγαθων τα εναντια.*

“Therefore all things belong to you and are dependent on you. For if you agree with my opinion, I suppose fatherland is free and the first city of those in Greece; but if you choose the opinion of those dissuading the attack, the things opposite of the good things which I narrated will come into being.”

Here Miltiades wraps up his argument with the same encouragement and call to urgency that he

used at the beginning of his speech to Callimachus. As before “you” is emphasized in various ways: by juxtaposition with the keyword “*νυν*”, with the repetition, *ες σε* and *εκ σεο*, and *σν* in the nominative which is usually emphatic since it is unnecessary for the grammar, pressing Callimachus that on his decision, everything rests.

ταυτα λεγων ο Μιλτιάδης προσκταται τον Καλλιμαχος· προσγενομενης δε του πολεμαρχου της γνωμης εκεκυρωτο συμβαλλειν.

Saying these things, Miltiades wins over Callimachus. And after the war archon came to the opinion, it has been decided to attack.

This sentence wraps up the dispute over the military decision, and here we see again, the word “*συμβαλλειν*”. In fact, in this passage of about one page up to this point, the word “to attack” occurred 8 times, and in each time, Herodotus uses the same word, rather than a synonym, or another phrase, as he often does in other places for variation. In this repetition of “*συμβαλλειν*”, Herodotus signifies that this is the most important word in the entire passage, and as we see in the actual battle, the victory of Athenians can be attributed to their initiative in attacking, attacking on a run, rather than standing ground and fighting.

This is also the first place in the passage where the word *γνωμη* occurs in singular without being contrasted with another *γνωμη*. The preceding passage had the theme of controversy, contrast and plurality of opinions. Now, once that the war archon made the choice and tipped the balance, we see a unified stance, where there is single opinion, and in fact, as we would expect in a democracy, a majority rule, with the generals who held the differing opinion now following the decision of the majority.

μετα δε οι στρατηγοι των η γνωμη εφερε συμβαλλειν, ως εκαστου αυτων εγινετο πρυτανη της ημερης, Μιλτιάδη παρεδδσαν.

After that when the command of the day came to each of the generals whose opinion favored to attack, they handed it over to Miltiades.

The theme of single-mindedness that began in the previous sentence is further developed in this sentence, as we are now told about the “*πρυτανη*”, in contrast to the earlier “ten generals”, with

the war archon as the eleventh member. Before, there were too many leaders of equal rank, each going on his own way, but now there is a single commander, even just for a day, with a clear chain of command. By delaying the mention of this chairmanship, Herodotus enhances the contrast between the atmosphere of schism before the decision had been reached and the atmosphere of unity after the decision.

οδὲ δεκομενος ουτι κω συμβολην εποιεετο, πριν γε δη αυτου πρωτανητη εγενετο.

But he, receiving the command, did not yet make the attack, until at least it was his own turn.

In this curious sentence, we see Miltiades delaying the attack, even though the command has been given to him. With the connative force of the imperative we might even surmise that Miltiades did not even attempt to attack the Persians, deliberately holding off the attack for which he was an ardent supporter. Because Herodotus does not tell us clearly why he did so, we can only guess as to Miltiades' motives. A rather obvious guess is that he was readying the troop for battle order. After all, the decision to attack have only just been reached. But would that have taken so long, while Miltiades delayed at least for a few days, since more than one of the other generals gave up his command of the day already? Or was there still some internal struggle—more arguments and contention from the generals who supported not attacking—that Herodotus does not tell us, that he could not begin the attack just yet?

Another interesting guess is that Miltiades was waiting for the Spartans—after all, Athenians sent a messenger asking for their help. And when it was Miltiades' actual day of command, he must have felt that it was not possible to wait any longer, before one of their own ranked turned traitor as he feared. This conjecture is further supported by the fact that Spartans missed the battle only by a day or two.

In this way, Herodotus contrasted the differing opinions of the Athenian generals before the battle of Marathon, employing various stylistic and rhetorical devices to convince his audience to the point of view of Miltiades, and subtly exposing an instance of democracy in action.