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Political and Natural Reversal in Herodotus

A central theme in Herodotus' *Histories* is reversal brought about by the passage of time. While scholars have paid much attention to the ways in which this principle operates in political and human affairs (e.g., Immerwahr 1966, Lateiner 1989, Evans 1991), its role in the natural world has been less thoroughly investigated. In this paper I will draw a connection between political and natural reversal in the *Histories* by focusing on Herodotean accounts of natural phenomena. I also will suggest how my analysis might help us to appreciate better some of the main lessons that the author develops in his work.

In the proem Herodotus announces one of his most important organizing principles: he will cover both small human settlements and great ones, since "most of those cities which were great in the past have become small, while those which in my time were great were previously small" (1.5). In accordance with this principle of temporal reversal, accounts of political decline appear frequently throughout the work. Among the most famous examples are Candaules' assassination by Gyges, Cyrus' slaughter at the hands of the Massagetae, and Xerxes' defeat in Greece. Reversal of fortune, indeed, is so central to the Herodotean universe that in Croesus' case only divine intervention can stop it. About to be consumed by the fire of the funeral pyre on which the victorious Cyrus has placed him, Croesus is saved only by Apollo acting as *deus ex machina*.

But this principle of temporal reversal is not limited to political and human affairs; for Herodotus it governs the natural world as well. This is demonstrated especially forcefully in his ethnographical account of Egypt, where we find him theorizing the transformation of land into water, and of water into land. At the beginning of Book II he argues that Egypt was originally either marsh-land or covered by water. With the passage of time, however, the Nile produced enough silt to transform it into land. The author then looks far into the future: "If the Nile resolved to turn its course toward the Arabian Gulf, what would prevent its being filled up with silt within twenty thousand years?" (2.11)

What is most interesting is the way in which temporal reversals in nature are correlated with temporal reversals in human and political affairs. It was the achievement of the early Egyptian king Min to construct dykes to protect Memphis from the river. Although Min thereby effected the transformation of water into land, there nonetheless remains the danger that at some point in the future the land will return to water -- for which reason, as Herodotus reports, the Persians of his own day continually reinforce the dykes. For should they burst open, the natural reversal of land back to water would be paralleled by a political reversal: Memphis, a great city, would, in effect, disappear, thereby validating Herodotus' programmatic statement in the proem about the rise and fall of human settlements. Later in the *Histories*, in Xerxes' bridging of the Hellespont, we witness an actual interchange between land and water. Xerxes' hubristic reversal of the natural world incurs divine wrath and, in providing the Persians passage to Europe, is the first link in a chain of events ending in the Greeks' upset of Persian might. Another example of the way in which natural and political reversals are linked occurs earlier in the work and in another land. The Medes and the Lydians were at war. But when on one day in the sixth

year "day suddenly became night" (1.74) as a result of an eclipse, the two sides just as suddenly decided to make peace and to become friends.

The principle of temporal reversal, governing both the natural and the political spheres, is grasped by some of Herodotus' historical actors, while overlooked by others. The eclipse that interrupts the war between the Medes and the Lydians was foreseen and predicted by Thales of Miletus. He stands as the scientific counterpart of Solon of Athens, who sets out on his ten years of travels not only for the purpose of satisfying his curiosity about the world but also to avoid being compelled to repeal any of the laws he had established, which on account of an oath which they took the Athenians could not repeal by themselves (1.29). Solon has grasped the tendency of the political world to undergo reversal, just as Thales has grasped the tendency of the natural world to do so; and indeed Solon at least is able to put his understanding of this universal principle to good use. Those Herodotean actors, on the other hand, who assume falsely that the future will be merely a continuation of the present, such as Croesus, Cyrus, and Xerxes, are likely to encounter unpleasant surprises.