THE PHOINISSAI OF PHRYNICHOS

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In the Introduction to his History Herodotus disassociates himself deliberately from the accounts of the causes of the conflict between Greeks and barbarians which he has just given and attributes them to the Persians and to the Phoenicians (1,5,3). The accounts themselves are all taken from Greek Mythology, best known to us and to Herodotus from Attic Tragedy. The stories of Io, Europa, Medea, Helen are all given in chronological order and they culminate in the claim that the Greeks started the war between Asia and Europe and that the Persian attacks upon Greece merely continued the armed conflict. Herodotus was referring here to the Trojan War which was begun by the Greeks; we may recall that Herodotus himself was not unsympathetic to this type of argument since he declared (V,97,3) that the Athenian military support of the Ionian revolt was ‘the beginning of evil both to Greeks and barbarians’ (ἀρχὴ κακῶν ἐγένετο Ἑλληνικόν τε καὶ Ἑλληνοῖς). Similarly, in Herodotus’ Introduction the various kidnappings of women are described as the deed of unjust men (1,4,2: ἀνδρῶν ἄδικῶν . . . ἔδωκαν), and Herodotus begins his own account of the conflict (1,5,3) by pointing out that Kroisos was the first to start unjust actions against the Greeks (ὑπάρχειν τοῖς ἄνδρι κατὰ τοὺς Ἑλλήνας). Thus Herodotus’ Introduction offers a mythological perspective which places the Persian Wars within Greek History, beginning in the days of the Heroes and even before their time, for both Io and Europa belong to earlier generations.

There are thematic links among the stories which show that they have been slightly changed to form a coherent transition from abduction of women to warlike action, from abductions in which various Greek and Asiatic cities were involved to warfare, first between Greeks and Trojans, and then between Persians and Greeks. While the Greeks involved in the mythical episodes were the same as those who fought in the Persian Wars, the Persians are considered the representatives of Asia and of places as far
apart as Kolchis, Troy, Phoenicia, Egypt. Another striking feature is the absence of the gods, especially of Zeus who plays such an important part in the stories of Io and of Europa.

Herodotus maintains that the entire story is told by the learned Persians (I,1,1: ΠΕΡΙΕΘΕΙΟΝ οί λόγιοι and corrected by the Phoenicians who disagree only with the story of Io (1,3,2), and we must take as a fact that the historian connected the account with Persians and Phoenicians (1,5,3: ταύτα μὲν νῦν ΠΕΡΙΕΘΕΙΟΝ οί λόγιοι καὶ ΦΟΙΝΙΚΙΑΣ ΛΕΓΟΥΣΙΝ). It is however a Greek story which has been artfully modified to suit the Persian claim that it was the Greeks who started warlike activities against Asia (I,4,1: ΠΟΣΤΕΡΟΥΣ γὰρ ὁ ἈΣΙΑΝΟΣ στρατεύεσθαι ἐς τὴν Ἀθηναίαν ή σακεῖς ἐς τὴν Ἐλλάδαν). While Greeks were involved in all these mythological stories, the only link with the Persians was the fact that the Persians conquered during the sixth century B.C. all the places in Anatolia which were involved in the kidnappings, Kolchis, Phoenicia, Troy and also Egypt.

Herodotus' source was a poetic treatment of the mythological background of the Persian Wars, given from the Persian side and by Persian nobles, and involving Phoenicians in it somehow. If this interpretation is correct, the identity of this source is given by what we know of the 'Phoinissai' by Phrynichos (B.Snell, Tragicorum Graecorum Fragmenta I (1971) pp. 76-77 ΦΟΙΝΙΚΙΑΣ fragments 8,12): it dealt with the defeat of Xerxes, its scene was laid in Susa (and this was imitated by Aischylos in his 'Persians'), the Chorus consisted of Phoenician women who had come from Sidon, and among the characters were noble Persians, ἰδανὐς πάρεσθοι. We do not know much about the contents of the plays of Phrynichos, but he did compose an earlier historical play, mentioned by Herodotus (VI,21,2: πολιοκρατησειν ΦΡΟΝΙΜΟΥ δραμα μελητου 'ΑΛΩΣΥ), which shocked the Athenian audience.

There is no proof that Herodotus used the Phoinissai of Phrynichos in the introduction to his History, but this assumption would agree with the growing evidence that Herodotus used poetic sources not only in his accounts of Gyges, Kroisos, and Polykrates, but even in the story of the Persian Wars itself; in fact one may wonder how much of the 'dramatic' account of Xerxes and Artabanos (VII, 8-18 and 44-52) is derived from Phrynichos' play. Artabanos was one of the nobles left behind at Susa (VII, 53, 1) who could have been one of the characters in the play; Herodotus tells us that it was to Artabanos that Xerxes sent his reports from the expedition (VIII, 54), and he may have played as important a part in the 'Phoinissai' as Dareios, his brother, played in the 'Persians' of Aischylos.