História Antiga: Relações Interdisciplinares.
Fontes, Artes, Filosofia, Política, Religião e Receção

Carmen Soares, José Luís Brandão & Pedro C. Carvalho (coords.)

Versão integral disponível em digitalis.uc.pt
Thucydides and the Sexual Politics of Tyrannicide

Thomas Figueira (figueira@classics.rutgers.edu)
Rutgers. The State University of New Jersey.
Department of Classics

Abstract - I analyze the excursus on the would-be tyrannicides Harmodios and Aristogeiton in Thucydides book 6, which interrupts the crisis surrounding the mutilation of the Herms and profanation of the Mysteries before the Sicilian campaign. Thucydides' attention to the sexual motivations and distorted ideation of the tyrannicides was in deliberate opposition to a hagiographical tradition, enshrined in popular song, art, oratory, and Atthidography. Thucydides recognized that this affair originated in a quarrel over pederastic relations but was reluctant to see in pederasty an organizing principle for archaic politics, unlike [Plato] Hipparchus (which considered the tyrannicides culpable as aggressors). Thucydides' hesitancy also reacted against an elite tradition which not only glorified pederastic lovers (with Harmodios and Aristogeiton as paradigmatic) as natural opponents of tyranny but also even considered opposition to pederasty an outgrowth of tyranny. First witnessed in Plato's Symposium, this interpretation is attested by Phainias, Heraclides Ponticus, and Hieronymos of Rhodes, authorities preserved or supplemented by Athenaeus and Plutarch. Thucydides digressed because of his distaste for the irruption of the personal, especially the sexual, into politics, a trait shared by the tyrannicides and the demos in its reaction against Alkibiades.

Keywords - Thucydides; pederasty; tyrannicide; Harmodios & Aristogeiton; profanation of the Mysteries; Alkibiades, mutilation of the Herms; Peisistratids

The discussion by Thucydides of the would-be tyrannicides Harmodios and Aristogeiton is striking on many accounts. This remarkable excursus is set within the narrative of the reaction to the mutilation of the Herms and the profanation of the mysteries on the eve of the Sicilian Expedition (415). Here I

1 Thuc. 6. 54. 3-59. 4. For simplicity, 'tyrannicides' will sometimes replace Harmodios and Aristogeiton. Thuc. 1. 20. 2 is a shorter excursus meant to stress the frailty of popular memory (here on the status of Hipparkhos as tyrant) and the historian's need for critical accuracy. See Hornblower CT'1. 57, but contrast how Thuc. 6. 54. 1 and 6. 55. 1 seem to echo 1. 20. 1 (cf. CT'3. 441). The most recent treatment is Meyer 2008: 26-32.

2 See Osborne 1985, Quinn 2007: 82-95, 100-105, for cultural history of the Herms. That Hipparkhos was arguably the first to erect such monuments in number might well have started Thucydides thinking about his assassination here ([Plato] Hipparch. 228B-E; cf. Harp. s.v. 'Ερμαί).
intend to explore an aspect that has challenged scholarly interpretation, namely the historian’s remarkable insistence that the motivation of the assassins lay in sexual impulse, as the words in bold indicate, a unique invocation of sexuality as an historical factor in the *Histories.*

6. 54. 1: τὸ γὰρ Ἀριστογείτονος καὶ Ἀρμοδίου τόλμην δι’ ἐρωτικὴν ξυντυχίαν ἐπεχειρήθη ... the act of *boldness* of Harmodius and Aristogeiton was undertaken because of a *sexual* happenstance ...

6. 54. 3: ὁ δὲ ἐρωτικῶς περιαληγήσας καὶ φοβηθεὶς τὴν Ἱππάρχου δύναμιν μὴ βία προσαγάγηται αὐτόν, ἐπιβουλεύει εὐθὺς ὡς ἀπὸ τῆς ὑπαρχούσης ἁξιώσεως κατάλυσιν τῇ τυραννίδι. [Aristogeiton] being in extreme *sexual* distress and frightened about the power of Hipparchus lest he bring him [Harmodios] over by force, straightway plotted the overthrow of the tyranny on the basis of whatever personal standing and resources he had.

6. 56. 2: χαλεπῶς δὲ ἐνεγκόντος τοῦ Ἁρμοδίου πολλῷ δὴ μᾶλλον δι´ ἐκείνον καὶ ὁ Ἀριστογείτων παρωξύνετο. καὶ αὐτοῖς τὰ μὲν ἄλλα πρὸς τοὺς ἄνευ ὁμολογήσεως καὶ ἐκδικηθέντο, εἰς τὸ ἔργον ἐπεπράκτο ... '[in reaction to the insult toward Harmodios' sister] With Harmodios reacting painfully, much more for his sake was Aristogeiton goaded into rage. And the various measures were prepared by them with reference to those who were about to collude in undertaking the affair.'

6. 57. 2-3: καὶ ως εἶδόν τινα τῶν ξυνωμοτῶν σφίσι διαλεγόμενον οἰκείως τῷ Ἱππίᾳ ... ἔδεισαν ... τὸν λυπήσαντον καὶ δι´ ὅνπερ πάντα ἀρχὴ τῆς ἐπιβουλῆς καὶ ἡ ἀλόγιστος τόλμα ἐγένετο. 'when they saw one of the fellow conspirators conversing familiarly with Hippias ... they were afraid ... they wished to take vengeance first, if they were able, on the one giving them distress, for whom they were risking everything ... they encountered Hipparkhos at the so-called Leokoreion and immediately falling on him heedlessly, as one [Aristogeiton] would on account of *sexual* rage and one [Harmodios] having suffered *hybris*, they struck and killed him.'

6. 59. 1: τοιούτῳ μὲν τρόπῳ δι´ ἐρωτικὴν λύπην ἢ τε ἀρχὴ τῆς ἐπιβουλῆς καὶ ἡ ἀλόγιστος τόλμα ἐκ τοῦ παραχρήμα περιδεοῦσ’ Ἀρμοδίῳ καὶ Ἀριστογείτονι ἐγένετο. ‘in such a manner through *sexual* distress

---

3 See Schwartz 1919: 184; Loraux 1985: 14-15; Stahl 2003: 2; Hornblower *CT* 3. 433-453 (and esp. 436, 440-441 on the sexual aspect); Meyer 2008: 15-18. This vehemence was recognized in antiquity and attributed to Thucydides’ Peisistratid descent (Hermippus fr. 62W apud Marcell. *Vita Thuc.* 18; cf. Σ Θuc. 1. 20. 2).