The Puddle Plot: An Argument for a Nested Temporal Logic in the Interpretation of Herodotus

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Herodotus wrote *The Histories* nearly two and a half millennia ago. Yet despite the extensive temporal and cultural gaps between Herodotus' own time and the present age, many modern scholars have shoehorned the ancient's writings into our modern, western understandings of history. While Herodotus' writing is more fluid in terms of linearity and cyclical chronologies, our modern histories are constructed within a binary. Indeed, history today is usually categorized as either linear or cyclical, but not both. These modern understandings have been retroactively imposed on Herodotus. For example, in his paper "Historical and Philosophical Time", Chester Starr argued that, "Certainly there is no series of cycles in [Herodotus'] account."[1] Instead, the author wrote that, "On the whole Greek – and Roman – historical writing was in practice what we may call 'linear'".[2] Because Starr is using the binary of linear and cyclical history, the scholar is obliged to categorize in absolute terms. *The Histories*, however does not follow this strict binary. Rather, the chronology of *The Histories* is fluid and comprehensive. In this paper I will argue that the modern binary is inadequate and I will propose an alternative logic in which cyclical histories occur "nested" within a linear chronology. I have coined this framework "The Puddle Plot". To support this new framework I will focus in detail on the logos of Pisistratus.[3]

While the logos of Pisistratus occurs within a chronological framework that moves linearly through time, it also occurs as a series of repeating cycles. Pisistratus is introduced for the first time in the context of a civil contention between two parties: the Sea coast faction headed by Megacles and the Plain faction headed by Lycurgus.[4] Pisistratus, aspiring to become the tyrant of Athens, formed a third party. While Megacles and Lycurgus were busy fighting, Pisistratus acquired a guard and took over Athens. In response, Megacles and Lycurgus reconciled their differences and ousted the tyrant.[5] This completed the first historical cycle of the logos.

At the beginning the historiographical structure of *The Histories* fits a linear narrative framework, but as the logos of Pisistratus progresses it takes on a cyclical interiority. This process occurs much in the same way as waves propagate in a puddle of

[1] Chester G. Starr, "Historical and Philosophical Time," *History and Theory* 6, no. 6 (1966): 27.
[2] Ibid., 28.
[3] The term logos here is referring to what Elizbeth Irwin and Emily Greenwood describe as an "individual section within the larger story". Elizabeth Irwin and Emily Greenwood, "Introduction: Reading Herodotus, Reading Book 5," in *Reading Herodotus*, ed. by E. Irwin and E. Greenwood (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 6.
[4] Herodotus, *The Histories*, 59.17-19
[5] Hdt. 60.1-3

water. The puddle of water represents the logos, while the water underneath the surface represents all the possible representations of the narrative. The puddle as a confined space represents Herodotus' limitations to working within the writer-reader contract of the period, and the surface of the water is the story told. At the beginning of the logos, an event causes a series of cyclical waves that radiate out from this central event, much as if a pebble were dropped in a puddle. These waves, while similar to each other and following the same course, are chronological. The waves flow one after the other, though always in a different temporal space, until the puddle itself passes out of significance. The narratives imbedded within the logos operate in a similar fashion. Each narrative acts as a repeating historical cycle, following the same course but in a different time. Thus the puddle plot framework is both cyclical *and* linear and therefore more suited to Herodotus' writing than traditional interpretations.

The second historical cycle began once Pisistratus had been removed from power. Without a common enemy, the tensions resumed between the Sea Coast faction and the Plain faction. Megacles was so exhausted by this quarrelling that he decided to join forces with Pisistratus and return the former tyrant to power.[6] The two devised a plan in which they dressed a woman up as the goddess Athena, who then rode into the city, asking the people of Athens to once again receive Pisistratus as a ruler. The plan was a success and Pisistratus was returned to power.[7] The tyrant then took the daughter of Megacles in marriage as per their arrangement. Pisistratus, however, was nervous about consummating the marriage, seeing as the Alcmæonidæ were supposedly cursed. Instead, he, "lay with her in an unnatural manner."[8] After the woman's mother learned of this "unnatural" act, she informed the father Megacles who was so upset that he, "instantly made up his difference with the opposite faction," that of Lycrugus. Pisistratus, nervous about what was coming, fled the country.[9] This completes the second historical cycle. As we can see so far, while the logos moves linearly through time, the general story occurs as a series of nested cycles. Thus, the logos is both linear and circular.

Following this flight, Pisistratus spent eleven years in exile. He then made his way back to Athens and collected a significant number of partisans along the way, ones "who loved tyranny better than freedom",[10] according to Herodotus. Pisistratus also received funds from those who owed him during his eleven-year exile, particularly the Thebans. The former tyrant was therefore materially able to mount an insurgency against the resolved factions. Pisistratus then marched on Athens where he convinced the people to reinstate him as their ruler. Once in power he further entrenched his tyranny.[11] The first half of the third historical cycle was thus completed, ending the logos.

While the exact particulars change from cycle to cycle, the general story is repeatedly retold: Pisistratus gains power, establishes his tyranny, and is then removed

[6] Hdt. 60.3-9
[7] Hdt. 61.1-8.
[8] Hdt. 61.2-6.
[9] Hdt. 61.10-13.
[10] Hdt. 62.4-5.
[11] Hdt. 64.1-4.

from power by the now-united factions. These cycles fit well within a repeating version of literary theorist Frank Kermode's *tick tock* plot. In Kermode's framework stories begin with a *tick* and end with a *tock*: The *tick* represents the beginning of the action and the *tock* represents the conclusion. In his book *The Sense of an Ending* Kermode argues that the interval after *tick* comes with, "a lively expectation of *tock*, and a sense that however remote *tock* may be, all that happens happens as if *tock* were certainly following."[12] The cycles of the puddle plot happen in the same way. Each wave begins as a *tick* that inevitably completes its cycle with the terminal *tock*, followed by the next *tick*. Pisistratus' rise to power and the entrenching of his authority can be seen as the *tick*, Pisistratus's rule as the interval of silence, and his eventual removal as the inevitable end: the *tock*. By the time the third and final cycle is described, the reader is left with an expectation of closure. Herodotus, however did not complete this cycle of the logos. He sacrificed the completion of the logos for the coherency of the larger narrative and, because of this, the Pisistratus logos was left in the liminality between *tick* and *tock*.

While the cyclical rises and falls of Pisistratus were descriptive, the tyranny of Pisistratus itself was silenced. In the first cycle, Herodotus explained that after acquiring the sovereignty of Athens, Pisistratus held control, "without disturbing the previously existing offices or altering any of the laws."[13] The reader therefore gets the impression that Pisistratus did nothing while in power. In the following cycles, while Pisistratus became known as a tyrant, Herodotus says nothing of his actions. The ancient only mentions those actions relevant to Pisistratus' eventual downfall and therefore, the completion of the cycle. While his political actions as a tyrant were irrelevant to the cyclical fulfillment of the history, his laying with the daughter of Megacles in an "unnatural" manner was essential because it led to Pisistratus losing favour with Megacles, and thus propagated the *tock* of the second cycle.[14] In this way, while Starr may be correct that the overall structure is linear, even the design and detail of the narratives are used for the completion and propagation of cycles.

A major theoretical component of the puddle plot framework is that every effect has a cause, and all cycles radiate out from an initial disturbance, or "pebble". Indeed, throughout the logos, Herodotus built a chain of causality that satisfies this requirement. At the beginning, a prodigy advises Hippocrates that, "if he [Hippocrates] had a son [he should] disown him".[15] Hippocrates disregards this advice, an action that unleashed the subsequent chain of events under Pisistratus. In this way, the entire logos is set up by an initial disturbance that, while setting up the chain of causality for the logos as a whole, simultaneously created an array of echoed narrative waves nested within the narrative. These echoes then propagate one after the other, like the ripples in a puddle. In a sense then, Herodotus nests a micro-structure of causality within the larger causal chain of the logos.

[12] Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 46.
[13] Hdt. 59.33-38.
[14] Hdt. 61.5-6.
[15] Hdt. 59.14-15.

In the first cycle, Pisistratus wounded himself and then lied to the people, saying that he had been attacked by his enemies. In this way he was able to persuade the people to assign him a guard. Pisistratus, "[t]hus strengthened … broke into revolt and seized the citadel,"[16] and Herodotus wrote that it was, "[i]n this way he acquired the sovereignty of Athens."[17] When Pisistratus deceived the people and acquired a guard he created the cause that would lead to his assumption of control. While this progression may seem obvious, it is the language employed by Herodotus that foregrounds the ideological intent of the logos. By stating that it was "in this way" that Pisistratus gained power, Herodotus leaves no room for ambiguity. It places this cause as the *only* cause. At the same time, Pisistratus' assumption of power in Athens, was also a cause. Indeed, Herodotus is explicit in writing that the two factions, "united to drive him out."[18] It was the desire of Megacles and Lycrugus to drive Pisistratus out, a symptom of Pisistratus' controlling Athens that lead to the unification of the factions, and therefore the tyrant's downfall.

After Pisistratus was removed, the quarrelling between the factions began anew. This quarrelling "wearied" Megacles. It was this exhaustion that became the cause for Megacles' approaching of Pisistratus, and the beginning of the second historical cycle. Pisistratus then regained power and married the daughter of Megacles. While in the first cycle, the cause of his downfall was his holding power in the first place, the second historical cycle is a repetition of the original cause of the logos as a whole: a curse. Pisistratus did not want to have sex with the daughter of Megacles, because the Alcmæonidæ, the group from which she belonged, was, "supposed to be under a curse."[19] This caused Pisistratus to lay with his new wife in an "unnatural" way, which caused his second downfall, thus completing the second cycle.

After his eleven-year exile, Pisistratus and his force began marching up from Marathon and they met their adversaries near the temple of Pallenian Athena.[20] This time, however, the state was not weakened by quarrelling and also no easy alliances could have been made to ensure Pisistratus' return to power. Herodotus logically could not reuse his previous causes and thus, the third cycle of history seemed interrupted. However, before the cyclicality was permanently interrupted, the inceptive disturbance—the theme of the prophecy—returned to his aid. While the theme of the prophecy had previously had negative effects for Pisistratus, this time the theme was mobilized for his benefit. The soothsayer, named Amyphilylas, announced:

> Now has the cast been made, the net is out-spread in the water,
> Through the moonshiny night the tunnies will enter the meshes.[21]

This prophecy was the cause that set into motion Pisistratus' plan through which he would eventually restore himself to power for a third time. The idea of the cast having already been made and the nets in the water referred to the motions set in place by the

[16] Hdt. 59.33-38.
[17] Hdt. 59.34-35.
[18] Hdt. 60.1-3
[19] Hdt. 61.2-4.
[20] Hdt. 62.11-13.
[21] Hdt. 62.18-19.

original cause of the logos, the pebble in the puddle. Because the cycle was already in motion, it would inevitability reach its fulfillment, at which point the "tunnies … [would] enter the meshes". While the text does not state in any explicit way that the prophecy caused Pisistratus' third rise to power, it mobilizes a series of indications that do. The first indication was that, "Pisistratus, apprehend[ed] its meaning… [and] accept[ed] the oracle."[22] Thus, at a fundamental level, the Oracle gave Pisistratus advice he could use, leaving the reader with the nagging possibility that Pisistratus would and did use it. A second indication involves the prophecy's words themselves, "Through the moonshiny night the tunnies will enter the mesh." What is implied in this statement is that through the night (a period of sleep) the fish will enter the mesh (the trap) of the already cast net (chain of events). Pisistratus realized the oracle's predictions by attacking the enemy troops after their midday meal while many had taken "to dice" or "to sleep" (moonshiny night) and, "put them to the rout."[23] He then sent his sons on horseback to "overtake the fugitives", bringing his enemies into his control, like tunnies into the mesh of his net.[24]

A third allusion involves Herodotus' aesthetic[25] of narrative minimalism that shaped the overall historiography of the logos. To clarify, the minimalist aesthetic I am referring to is the way Herodotus silenced any particular event that did not propagate the cycle or contextualize the logos within the greater narrative. For example, Pisistratus' actions while in power in Athens were not important to the fulfillment and propagation of the cycle, and were not mentioned in *The Histories*. Herodotus sufficed to say that, he was a tyrant and left the gap-filling to the reader. In this sense, given the governing aesthetic logic of the logos, the very mention of the oracle immediately preceding Pisistratus' actions is evidence that those actions were precipitated by the oracle's prophecy.

Furthermore, Pisistratus' purifying the island of Delos after his conquest of Athens could easily be seen as further corroborating the oracle's prophecy as a cause for his behaviour. Pisistratus purified the island as per the "injunctions of an oracle" following his conquest of Athens.[26] By implying that an oracle influenced Pisistratus' actions, Herodotus established the character of Pisistratus as one who listens to oracles.

[22] Hdt. 63.1-3.
[23] Hdt. 63.3-7.
[24] Hdt. 63.9-12
[25] My choice of the word "aesthetic" instead of "style" here was deliberate and speaks to other scholarship on ancient history. Meir Sternberg, in his book *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, explains that when reading ancient histories there are three principles at play: ideological, historical and aesthetic. Sternberg explains that, "Historiography has no eye but for the past," and that, "it would like nothing better than to tack fact onto fact in an endless procession, marching across all artistic and ideological design." Opposing this is the aesthetic principle, for which the performance is everything. Sternberg goes on to write that, "ideology and aesthetics meet to shape history, and with it the narrative as a whole." This is where it becomes important to use aesthetic instead of style. A style could refer to length of sentences, amount of detail, word choice, etc. But aesthetic necessarily implies an influence on the historical narrative itself. Here, the aesthetic is a principle that pulls on the historical narrative with such force that it literally truncates the historical logos of Pisistratus in favour of an aesthetic of minimalism. Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 41, 46.
[26] Hdt. 64.8-10.

Thus the possibility that Amyphilylas's prophecy would have been listened to and acted upon is substantiated and placed conceptually as the initial cause that allowed for the cycle of history to continue.

At this point in the logos, the reader is anticipating the end of the third cycle, yet the *tock* of the third cycle is never established and the reader is simply left with the silence between *tick* and *tock*. Indeed, because the continuation of the Pisistratus logos is irrelevant at this point to the greater narrative, Herodotus does not complete the third cycle. In this way Herodotus' aesthetic of minimalism silences the historiography of Pisistratus. He writes only that, "Thus was the tyranny of Pisistratus established at Athens,"[27] ending the logos. In this way, while the interior narratives of *The Histories* may be cyclical, they are ultimately nested within and thus at the mercy of the overarching linear narrative.

Thus, while Starr was correct to suggest that the overall narrative form of *The Histories* is linear, he was wrong to state that it is *exclusively* linear. In doing so the scholar fell into modern western trappings of binaries, in which a narrative must be exclusively linear or exclusively cyclical. Herodotus' narrative, however, was a mixture of both. Indeed, while *The Histories* as a whole takes on a chronological form, there is a series of cyclical narratives nested within it. While the linear narrative creates an initial disturbance, the disturbance creates a series of cyclical narrative waves within the overarching linear structure: the puddle plot. By restricting Herodotus' works to the modern binary of cyclical and linear histories, we obscure the complexity of his narrative nuances. In doing so, we move Herodotus from the father of history to the adopted son of modernity.

Works Cited

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[27] Hdt. 64.12