"The Classical Greek Historians on Democracy"

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Rhode Island Hall, Room 108

For Herodotus the most important constitutional distinction was between despotism and the freedom of constitutional government. Except in the Persian constitutional debate, he was not much interested in distinctions between forms of constitutional government; sometimes in praising constitutional government he used the language of the democracy of his own time, but he did not express an opinion on democracy as such. Thucydides considered democracy volatile and unreliable except when it had a Pericles to lead it; the speeches in his history which praise democracy give a more meritocratic picture of it than the Athenian reality, and the régimes which he explicitly praised were moderately oligarchic. He focused on the realities of power, and mentioned probouleutic councils only when they played more than their regular part in decision-making. Xenophon as a young man had moderately oligarchic sympathies, and for much of his later life was a dependant of the Spartans. He did not normally express an opinion on political régimes, except to condemn some as tyrannical, but for Athens he was willing to mention the council’s part in decision-making where Thucydides was not. As one of the commanders of the Ten Thousand after Cunaxa he behaved as other Greek commanders would have done, consulting other officers often, and calling assemblies when he judged it necessary, at which he tried but did not always manage to gain approval for what he wanted to do.

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