

Aristagoras, Histiaeus and the episode of the enslaved person with the tattooed message. A historical and philosophical evaluation of Hdt. 5.28

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Abstract: This brief paper gives an overview of the rather peculiar episode narrated in Herodotus' *Histories* 5.28, of how Histiaeus, former tyrant of Miletus residing in Susa, tattooed a message on a slave's head in order to safely deliver it to his son-in-law, Aristagoras, who has assumed the tyranny of the city in his place. The paper investigates the historical evidence as presented by various ancient sources and offers four different ways of reading this episode, outlining its importance for several research fields connected to ancient history: tattooing as a cultural practice in Antiquity, steganography in Antiquity, the social status of the enslaved, the philosophical and symbolical implications of the 'reification' of the enslaved. Thus, it raises some interdisciplinary reflections about these topics, both in the ancient world and in modern times.

Keywords: Tattooed message, Herodotus, *Historiae*, Aristagoras, Histiaeus

1. Introduction

Herodotus of Halicarnassus narrates an event that occurred on the southwestern coastal area of Anatolia, where he was born, a few decades earlier than his *floruit*:¹

“With all these fears in his mind, he began to plan revolt, for it chanced that at that very time there came from Susa Histiaeus' messenger, the man with the marked head, signifying that Aristagoras should revolt against the king. Since Histiaeus desired to give word to Aristagoras that he should revolt and had no other safe way of doing so because the roads were guarded, he shaved and branded the head of his most trustworthy slave. He waited till the hair

¹ Hdt. 5.28 (trans. Macaulay).

had grown again, and as soon as it was grown, he sent the man to Miletus with no other message except that when he came to Miletus, he must bid Aristagoras shave his hair and examine his head. The writing branded on it signified revolt, as I have already said. This Histiaeus did because he intensely disliked his detention at Susa and fully expected to be sent to the coast if there should be a revolt. If Miletus remained at peace, he calculated that he would never return there.”

The protagonist is Histiaeus, tyrant of Miletus beginning from 525 BC, to whose time the most extraordinary flourishing of the city is attributed (Map 1).² After taking part in the Persian expedition against the Scythians in 513 BC, he resided for almost a decade at Susa as an advisor to the Great King; at the same time Miletus was governed by Aristagoras, his son-in-law and cousin, the animator and leader of the rebellious Ionians. According to some scholars, this stay was a sort of golden prison, or at least it was probably felt as such by Histiaeus himself. According to the words of Herodotus reported here, Aristagoras would have moved towards the revolt in complete agreement with Histiaeus, indeed in some way following his instigation. I will not deal with the revolt of the Ionians, which started in 499/498³ and towards which Herodotus’ attitude was not very favourable.⁴

The context, which is well known, has been considered several times by modern ancient historians. The story of the rebellion of the Ionians, whether or not real or presumed, is a fundamental topic in ancient Greek history and, as such, has been considered by numerous scholars, of whom I would like to mention Pierluigi Tozzi and Santo Mazzarino (1916–1987).⁵

The episode of the message entrusted to the tattooed servant is also very well known and over the last twenty years it has already been discussed by modern scholars such as the classicist Page duBois⁶ and the specialist of the Graeco-Roman East, Maurice Sartre.⁷

With this paper it is not aimed to bring new thoughts about Greek slavery practice and discourse or communication methods; instead, the focus is the story of the tattooed enslaved person from the ancient source material which

² For recent research concerning Aristagoras, see Boffo 2012, and concerning Histiaeus, see Diepenbroeck 2023, 32–33.

³ Tozzi 1978, 111–112. For historical commentary, cf. 60 and especially 68, with the reference of the stratagem of the tattooed slave.

⁴ Tozzi 1978, part. 51.

⁵ Mazzarino 1980.

⁶ DuBois 2003.

⁷ Sartre 2009.

is included in several lines of investigation, among which: a. The history of tattooing in antiquity; b. Secret communications and shorthand, and; c. The consideration of enslaved persons in the ancient world.

2. Tattooing in antiquity

The message, which was intended to remain secret, could in theory have been written on the enslaved person's shaved head with some kind of ink. Herodotus does not explicitly mention tattooing, but since the fourth century BC, in the text of Aeneas Tacticus, perhaps a general, and indeed the author of several didactic military works, the explanation is straightforward and it has become the interpretation currently preferred by modern authors: "He shaved the head of his most faithful slave, tattooed him, and detained him until the hair had grown again [...] and gave the tattooed man no other orders except that when he had come to Miletus, under the presence of Aristagoras, he should request him to shave his head and examine it"⁸

Martine Gärtner, who studied tattooing among the ancient Greeks in 1990, noted that the practice seems to be foreign to the Greek world, except for prisoners of war – who were branded by the Persians – and runaway slaves.⁹ In her study, she does not refer to the episode narrated by Herodotus. Over the past fifteen years, Luc Renaut has conducted many studies on tattooing, its motivations, and its diffusion among men and women, not only in ancient times.¹⁰ However, the two authors I have cited dealt with the *Realien* (primary literature) and neglect the anecdote I am dealing with. Ralph Evêque focused on the use of tattoos as corporal punishment, stating that "dans les sociétés hellène et romaine effectivement, le tatouage exprimait nécessairement la sanction ou la domination".¹¹ So there are some fixed points. First, tattooing is not typical of free men, neither Greeks nor Romans. It appears to be linked to people of degraded dignity, prisoners, or fugitives. It was practiced in the world of barbarians, which also included the Persians. While Tina Brown mentions this story in 2019,¹² Martin T. Dinter and Astrid Khoo dedicate an essay to it the following year.¹³ Steiner had already written "for the tattoo as

⁸ Aen., Tact. 31.24–29.

⁹ Gärtner 1990, 104–107.

¹⁰ Renaut 2014, 2016, and 2024.

¹¹ Evêque 2023.

¹² Brown 2019.

¹³ Dinter & Khoo 2020.

alphabetic script, there is the tale of Histiaeus, who sends his written message pricked onto the scalp of this shaven slave”.¹⁴

3. Secret communications and steganography

Hidden communication has become extraordinarily important in recent years, after the enormous proliferation of communications, at all levels, followed by the need to protect the most sensitive contents. According to some modern authors, the episode narrated by Herodotus would represent the first mention or the real birth of steganography.¹⁵ The term, which became obsolete by the middle of the 20th century,¹⁶ has acquired new impetus in recent years from research in computer graphics and in general from information technology,¹⁷ obviously referring to processes very different from simply writing on a bald head.

An article published by Martine Diepenbroek in 2023 questions the secret communications in Persia and Sparta; she then published, in the same year, a volume on the same subject. This scholar writes that “steganography” is “hiding a message so that it seemed that there was no message at all”.¹⁸ This practice, attested in four different passages of Herodotus,¹⁹ would consist in situations in which “a clever individual tried to outmanoeuvre a tyrannical Near Eastern despot”.²⁰

The episode narrated by Herodotus, regardless of whether it genuinely took place or not, seems very modern because it speaks of a method to hide communication from those who are not authorized to receive it. For our society, so strongly imbued with communication, it also represents an ancient way to prevent deciphering by others; therefore, it constitutes a design idea for the use of a protected message.

4. The enslaved person as an object

Right at the beginning of his essay entitled “Slaves and (o)ther (o)bjects”, P. duBois inserts the episode of the enslaved person tattooed by Histiaeus.²¹

¹⁴ Steiner 1994, 157–158.

¹⁵ Shih 2010, 475.

¹⁶ Starting from Athanasius Kircher who wrote in the 17th century, McCracken 1948, notes: “The term ‘steganography’ is now obsolete” (p. 216).

¹⁷ Kipper 2003.

¹⁸ Diepenbroek 2023a, 62.

¹⁹ Hdt. 1.123, 5.28, 7.239 and 8.128.

²⁰ Ceccarelli 2013, 127–128.

²¹ DuBois 2003, 3–4.

The anecdote highlights how the figure of the enslaved person – in this case, as for the other enslaved persons in Greece – is substantially “invisible” and, therefore, not worthy of interest on the part of any guards, of any kind, or counter-espionage agents.²²

The same concept (slave = object) seems to be expressed in Roman law, which considers the enslaved person as a *res*.²³ It has been written that the “process of ‘reification’ of the *servus* can be attributed to the profound socio-economic transformations that affected the *res publica* (public affairs) starting from the end of the fourth century BC”.²⁴

Since the Late Republican period, the Varronian distinction is very famous, in which the enslaved person appears as an *instrumentum vocale*. Therefore, distinct from pure animality (*instrumentum mutum*) and in any case endowed with a personality that makes him capable of expressing himself and thinking. Potentially, he can become a free man, as happened to many ex-slaves. The same concept seems to make its way into Roman law, where Gaius includes enslaved people among the *res corporales*, tangible property. Nonetheless, the theorists of Roman law themselves recognize the enslaved person as a person, albeit *alieno iuri subiecta*.²⁵

5. For a philosophical interpretation of an authentic “tyrannical” gesture

Histiaeus and Aristagoras were in charge of ruling. From a philosophical – or social – point of view, the episode of the writing on the slave’s body represents a typical tyrant’s attitude, in the sense in which we understand this term in modern times.

Fugitive servants were indeed given a mark that revealed their condition. But this was, in addition to an additional penalty, an attribute relative to a person. The same disfigurement was inflicted on the persons of the vanquished as happened to some Thebans who deserted to the Persians by Xerxes I in

²² Before passing to the Roman law, a reference from Aristotle regarding the juridical status of slaves in ancient Greece should be made, e.g., Arist. *Pol.* 1254a: “...one who is a human being belonging by nature not to himself but to another is by nature a slave, and a person is a human being belonging to another if being a man he is an article of property, and an article of property is an instrument for action separable from its owner”. See also Lewis 2018, 33–48.

²³ Giaquinto 2022, 98.

²⁴ Galeotti 2023, 214.

²⁵ The ambiguity is clearly recognized in Pietro Bonfante’s book in 1925, 142.

480 BC²⁶ (Map 1). Fugitive servants were indeed given a mark that revealed their condition.²⁷ Herodotus himself writes that marking or tattooing was typical of barbarian peoples.²⁸ The use of the PERSON of the servant as writing material – even with the consent of the servant himself – reduces him to an OBJECT. The enslaved person is reduced to a surface on which it was written.

This is a fact that the human being reduced to slavery is deprived of all rights, so from ‘subject’ he becomes ‘object’, or patrimonial asset, private property. As such, he can be an object of exchange, of buying and selling, like any other commodity. Modern scholars, starting with P. duBois, have often spoken of the enslaved person as an object, and therefore, I might add, something non-human, that is, inhuman. In the context of slavery, the commodity is no longer labour or labour power, but rather the worker himself.²⁹

If we consider the Varronian tripartite division,³⁰ in the episode narrated by Herodotus, we see a degradation of the enslaved person from *instrumentum vocale* to *instrumentum mutum*. Marcus Terentius Varro cites the *plaustra* as an example of this last category in the late first century BC.

The episode we are dealing with, pictorially presents us with violence in another period and place, even if carried out on an unaware and even consenting body, exercised by someone who holds power, the Tyrant, precisely in the sense in which we understand it today. Histiaeus is a private citizen, although held in high esteem at the King’s court, but also a former tyrant and a person who intends to become a tyrant again. He is, therefore, accustomed to exercising a certain power over the people who depend on him.

So the episode, true or false, offers us an example of “REIFICATION”. That is, a phenomenon that affects subordinates indiscriminately, depriving them of their characteristics.

6. The concept of reification

This term sounds familiar to those who have lived through the second half of the last century, following the evolution of cultural currents in Italy and Europe. It touches deep chords, even if it refers to other, very different situations. Suppose we change the field entirely, passing to social philosophy and cultural anthropology. In that case, we can try to understand at least in part the

²⁶ Cf. also the Samians and the Athenians tattooing prisoners of war, Plut. *Per.* 26.3–4 and 28.1–3 and Ael. *VH* 2.9.

²⁷ Hdt. 7.233.2. See Jones, 1987, 147.

²⁸ Hdt. 1.113.2; 5.6.2, 7.35.1–3.

²⁹ Finley 1993, 85; Bonabello 2002, 57.

³⁰ Varro, *De re rustica*, I, 17, 1.

vastness of meanings that the concept of reification can assume. According to some authors, “living subjects become inanimate subjects” in contemporary culture.³¹ A long journey that starts from Hegel and reaches up to the present day has tried to interpret and clarify “reification” also in light of the theories of Karl Marx (1818–1883) and György Lukács (1885–1971).

When a free man offers his labour power for sale, for a fee, salary or other, he becomes a commodity according to a concept already expressed by Karl Marx, explored further by György Lukács in 1923 and recalled, in different contexts and sometimes with various meanings, by numerous authors of the 20th century. Also, Daniela Issa states, “Modern slavery in Brazil exemplifies the culmination of reification as theorized by György Lukács, characterized by the commodification and dehumanization of labor and the extreme objectification of workers, who become “human commodities” in the capitalist system, “commodities” that produce other commodities”.³² However, the concept of reification is not clearly expressed by all authors.

So, to sum up, the OBJECT would have been initially the commodity of labour (Marx), then the person of the worker himself (Lukács *et al.*) to arrive, in the sixties of the last century, at the extension of the concept of object to all men, at least in Western civilization and in its condition at that time.

Starting from a famous expression by Karl Marx, written by him in a letter in 1843, Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922–1975) took up the expression “The dream of a thing” in 1962 to title one of his novels from 1949–1950, which features peasants as protagonists. Previously, Italo Calvino (1923–1985) had extended the concept of reification in his article “Il mare dell’oggettività” (=“The sea of objectivity”) in 1960 not only to the working class, but to man in general.³³

7. Conclusions

Rereading Herodotus’ passage today leads us to reconsider, with eyes that are undoubtedly different from those who could read it in his time, some themes and concepts that are very present in contemporary political, anthropological, and social reflections.

The use of tattoos might seem completely marginal if they had not been so deeply rooted in numerous cultures since ancient times. In practice, tattoos use symbols and images to communicate a content related to the idea that the wearer has of himself and wants to speak to others. The tattooed individuals

³¹ Cortella 2013, 17.

³² Issa 2017, 90.

³³ Cf. Celentano 2023, 2.

we see around us nowadays behave not differently. However, the communication is addressed to very specific recipients.

The problem that the great grain traders of the United States and the stock exchange operators have had since the nineteenth century, that is, to address messages only and exclusively to particular recipients – excluding all others – is in the story of Histiaeus. Here, the problem is solved effectively, albeit somewhat artisanal and elementary, because communication passes directly from man to man, without intermediaries.

Finally, if I want to refer to my sensitivity, matured during the cultural perspective of the twentieth century, for me Histiaeus, according to Herodotus' story, represents the tyrant (former tyrant and prospective future tyrants) who concretely transforms his servant into an OBJECT, into a passive instrument, no longer speaking, but mute, to use Varro's categories.

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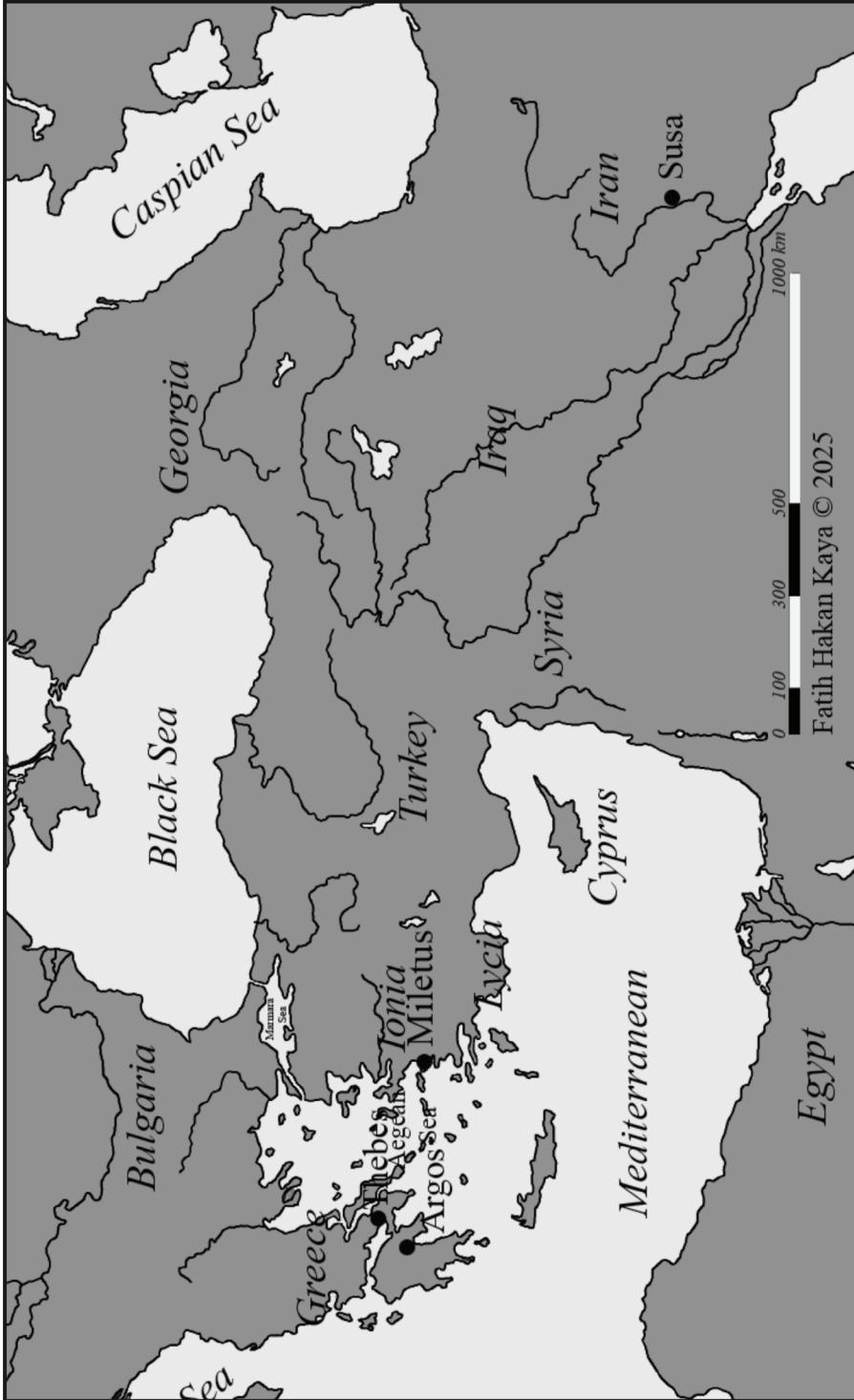
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Map caption and credit

Map 1. Map of the sites mentioned in the text (drawn by F. H. Kaya 2025).