

Adrastus: Greek Law and Order

The tragic story of Croesus and Adrastus, written by Herodotus in *The Histories*, is one that is a prime example of how law and order needed to be changed in Greek society. Herodotus, a Greek, is writing from a Persian perspective to the Greeks so that he may comment on how the old laws, such as the blood feud and *oikos*, were out dated, and that people should be looking to the new *polis* and laws of Solon's new constitution and following them instead.

It is important to note that Herodotus is writing this story in the fifth century BCE. According to Emily Baragwanath, Herodotus is writing from his culture and his point of views on these events. But that is not to say that what is in this book is all made up. He takes note from Homer throughout his stories and works the references into his new text. By doing this he can put emphasis on certain points and point out what is important for the reader to know. What Herodotus does is comment on the old ways of Homer and the new ways of current life.¹ This means that Herodotus can take a critical look at the Homeric blood feud and the new Solon constitution.

¹ Baragwanath, Emily, and Mathieu De Bakker. *Myth, Truth, and Narrative in Herodotus*. Accessed April 1, 2016. https://books.google.com/books?id=fRIsV4WvJUcC&pg=PA160&lpg=PA160&dq=presentations on Croesus and Adrastus&source=bl&ots=PZReRXd5Ws&sig=zy-c52pPKFsA3NvfxuOmHMVW37o&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjntu61_fzLAhXnvIMKHdlRAIEQ6AEI NjAF#v=onepage&q=presentations on Croesus and Adrastus&f=false. 'Strangers are from Zeus' page 145

When looking at Greek law and order we need to acknowledge the importance of the *oikos* and the blood feud that was the main way the Greeks would keep the law and order. A blood feud is when one person from a family gets killed. The family must avenge him, so they will kill someone from the original murderer's *oikos*. The blood feud continues until the feud is settled by killing out the whole *oikos*. The blood feud would have been detrimental to the Greek society, being so small, the Greeks needed to survive for their society to continue. An *oikos* is the household and family. By household it means that the house, the slaves, and any cattle or livestock that they would have on the land and whatever law matters were dealt with within the household. These reasons are why Herodotus brings up the need to change to the *polis* and Solon's constitution.

In Herodotus' *The Histories* Adrastus accidentally kills his brother. His father has no choice but to either kill him, and end his bloodline, or send him into exile. Obviously a father is not going to kill his son. It is important to note that he was sent into exile, and that to pay for his crimes he was banished from his kin group and left with no protection. This was simply the way for ancient Greek society. Now Adrastus could never go back to his *oikos*, so he had to find a new kin group. This would have been a very dangerous journey to make alone, because a highwayman could have killed him because of his lack of protection.

Adrastus seeks out Croesus. The gods have already marked down Croesus for doom, because he thinks that he is the most fortunate of human kind. Adrastus asks Croesus for purification with accordance to the law. The Persian purification law in Lydian closely parallels the Greek law of purification. In the law of purification, the

guest requests to be purified for his wrong doings, and in Adrastus' case he gets the blood guilt washed off of him. And Adrastus is absolved of all past crimes. In accordance with Greek law of Hospitality, it is the household's job to welcome all strangers into the house and feed them. It is against the laws to ask a stranger his name before offering food and drink. The Persians and the Greeks would have been well aware of these laws, as it is Zeus that makes sure that they are being followed. It is in accordance with the laws that Croesus would do what Adrastus wished, before asking the young man who he was and what he wanted.

Adrastus then goes on to tell Croesus who he is, "My name is Adrastus, I killed my brother by accident, and here I am driven from home by my father and stripped of all I possess. Croesus says if you stay in my dominion you shall have all you need."²

This would have been the norm, at the time because it is a kin based society, and people are aware of whom you are related to. Croesus could not require Adrastus to leave either, because it is against the laws of hospitality, so Croesus had to accept Adrastus into his *oikos*. To turn Adrastus away would have upset Zeus, meaning that Croesus would have been punished for it.

Adrastus now had a new *oikos*; this means that if he were to travel somewhere he would have this new protection, and people to look out for him. This is important in a kin based society. Even though he is currently in exile for the

² Herodotus, Aubrey De Sélincourt, and John Marincola. *The Histories*. London: Penguin Books, 1996. Book 1, chapter 37

crimes he has committed, he is now being looked after and in debt to Croesus and his generosity.

Croesus had a dream that would have been taken as a warning from the gods, that his son would be killed by an iron spear point. To protect his son Croesus refuses to let his son join in on the boar hunt. Atys, Croesus' son, thinks that the people would view him as a coward, if he were not to join in, so he goes and confronts his father. Croesus then shares his dream with Atys. "You dreamt that I should be killed by an iron weapon. Very well; has a boar got hands? Can a boar hold this weapon you fear so much?"³ That convinced Croesus that Atys should join in on the expedition.

Croesus requests that Adrastus that goes with to protect his son. "I expect a fair return for my generosity; take charge of my son on this boar hunt."⁴ Adrastus pleads that he should not go and that he should stay behind because he thinks that he is bad luck. Croesus tells Adrastus that because he was a welcomed guest and Croesus has spared no expense to have him as part of the new oikos, that Adrastus must go and protect Atys from any misfortune that might fall upon him.

It is during this time of his protection that Adrastus commits his second crime, and kills Atys. Adrastus misses the boar and throws the spear into Atys killing him. Adrastus second crime can be viewed as more horrible than his first because it

³ Herodotus, Aubrey De Sélincourt, and John Marincola. *The Histories*. London: Penguin Books, 1996. Book 1, chapter 39

⁴ Herodotus, Aubrey De Sélincourt, and John Marincola. *The Histories*. London: Penguin Books, 1996. Book 1, chapter 41

was caused against the man who took him in and purified him, at his request; he also offered him protection and an *oikos*. Adrastus also feels like he has caused the ultimate betrayal to his benefactor by killing his kin. Because Adrastus is protected under the laws of Hospitality and Zeus, Croesus cannot touch Adrastus. Even if Croesus could it would start a blood feud with Adrastus original *oikos*. Adrastus begs Croesus to kill him, but he cannot. "Friend, he said as you condemn yourself to death, there is nothing more than I can require of you. Justus is satisfied. This calamity is not your fault; you never meant to strike the blow, though strike you did. Some god is to blame – some god who long ago warned me of was to happen."⁵

According to Vernon L. Provençal "Croesus believes that Adrastus was only an agent of divine – that a person who acts under constraint of a higher power cannot be held responsible."⁶

Because of this second crime that Adrastus has now committed he feels like he can no longer live with this guilt, he goes and stands over Atys grave and kills himself. It is significant because it has settled all debts to not only Adrastus' original *oikos* but, also to his new *oikos* that gave him protection and new kin. Adrastus killed himself because he could not live with the new guilt that he killed the man's son who

⁵ Herodotus, Aubrey De Sélincourt, and John Marincola. *The Histories*. London: Penguin Books, 1996. Book 1, chapter 45

⁶ Provençal, Vernon. *Sophist Kings: Persians as Other in Herodotus*.
<https://books.google.com/books?id=sO7sCAAAQBAJ&pg=PA57&lpg=PA57&dq=presentations on Croesus and Adrastus&source=bl&ots=YSxkgIksiX&sig=uMkvOhiFicMXUIodPsbRnMHjz0A&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwiArabnsYDMAhVIYiYKHccXD2QQ6AEISDAJ#v=onepage&q=presentations on Croesus and Adrastus&f=false>

purified him of his first crime. This would have been the only way that Adrastus could have gotten rid of his guilt.

Heroditus tells this story as an example as why the Greek society needs to move away from that of the blood feud and *oikos*, and move to the new laws of the *polis* and Solon constitution.

The new laws that Herodotus is pointing out are that the Greek society needs to move from the *oikos* more a *polis* society. A *polis* society is opposite of an *oikos* society in how it dealt with people who broke the laws. This means that they implemented a law court that people could bring grievances to. There are different kinds of lawsuits the *dika* that is a private lawsuit that is brought on by the victim or an immediate blood relative. And a *graphē* or Solon law in order to protect the weak and those without kin. Any citizen that is in good standing can bring a lawsuit to the courts.

Because Adrastus was under the protection of Zeus's laws of Hospitality and not wanting to start a blood feud could not be charged for his crimes his only option was to kill himself. Herodotus is hinting that the old laws are out dated, and that if the Greek society should be looking at and following Solon's new laws Adrastus could have been brought to court, and might have lived. Herodotus is hinting through this story to a more responsible behavior, and society.