The emergence of Greek Isonomia in Ionia

By Charlotte Schubert (Leipzig):

If Ionia was considered the cradle of the sciences, the political developments of the poleis on the Greek mainland, in particular Athens, is regarded as the motor for the emergence of democracy.¹ Although democracy had also developed incrementally in Athens, the overthrow of the Peisistratid tyranny and subsequent reform carried out by Cleisthenes is considered the initial moment.² The development of democracy is defined starting from this phase of the Athenian history, characterized by some scholars of antiquity as the ‘Athenian Revolution’.³ Naturally this takes into account that this development took place incrementally and that even the establishment of representative structures, its execution and acceptance will have needed some time. Still this development is unsurprisingly viewed as a conceptional unit. Even the connected formation of the concept, to be recognized in the terms of isonomia and democratia or rather its adjective and verbal forms, is generally focused on Athens.⁴ In his work entitled ‘The Greek Discovery of Politics’, Christian Meier already emphasized that this development can hardly be seen as limited to Athens and that Athens cannot ‘have been initially leading’.⁵ Nevertheless, according to Christian Meier’s opinion, the reports of early isonomies describe only ‘broad oligarchies’ and only with Cleisthenes in Athens did the developmental process receive its specific direction towards democracy. The role of Ionia, which had been accentuated so emphatically by Jean-Pierre Vernant by referring to isonomia as the principle of a civil cosmos, which is directed toward a meson, a middle, like the cosmic model of Anaximander, has completely retreated into the background in course of this discussion and has even been quite repressed.⁶

But this perspective, focused on Athens blatantly contradicts the version presented by Herodotus in his historical work: it is well-known that he reports on several attempts by Ionian poleis to establish isonomies. As mentioned, Christian Meier viewed these as oligarchies, others Most scholars presume a backward projection from the experience in Athens and yet others fictional stories invented by the narrator Herodotus. The question is how plausible Herodotus’ depiction of the Ionian isonomies is and what we should picture under this Ionian isonomies when we follow him. In regards to the concepts applied, Herodotus’ depiction has a certain historicity. There are two contemporary witnesses, more or
less simultaneous to the events in Ionia: the famous Athenian drinking song that awards Harmodios and Aristogeiton honor for having brought the isonomia to the Athenians:

Athenaios XV 695 a:⁷

ἐν μάρτυρες κλαδί τοῦ ξύρου φορήσω, ὀσερ Ἀρμόδιος καὶ Ἀριστογείτων, ὅτε τὸ τύραννον κτανέτην ἱσονόμους τ’ Ἀθήνας ἐποιησάτην

I’ll wreathe my sword in myrtle bough,  
As Harmodius and Aristogeiton did,  
When they laid the tyrant low,  
And made Athens isonomous.

as well as the description of the physician and philosopher Alcmaeon, comparing tyranny (characterized as monarchy) and isonomia with illness and health:⁸

DK 24 B4:

Ἀ. τῆς μὲν ὑγείας εἶναι συνεκτικὴν τὴν ἱσονομίαν τῶν δύναμεων, ὕγρον, ἔριον, ψυχρὸν, θερμὸν, πικρόν, γλυκέον καὶ τῶν λοιπῶν, τῆς δ’ ἐν αὐτοῖς ἱσονομίας νόσου ποιητικὴν φθοροποιούν γὰρ ἐκατέρω μοναρχίαν. καὶ νόσου συμπέπτειν ὡς μὲν ὑφ’ ὑδατολόγη θηρμότητος ἢ ψυχρότητος, ὡς δ’ ἐξ συ ὑπάρχουσι τροφῆς ἢ ἕνδειας, ὡς δ’ ἐν οἷς ἢ * αἷμα ἢ μελέλην ἐγκέφαλον. ἐγγίνεσθαι δὲ τούτως ποτὲ κάκος τῶν ἐξοθέθην αἰτίων, ὑδάτων ποιῶν (?) ἢ χώρας ἢ κόπων ἢ ἀνάγκης ἢ τῶν τούτων παραπλησίων. τὴν δὲ ὑγείαν τὴν σύμμετρον τῶν ποιῶν κράσιν.

Health is the equality of rights of the functions, wet-dry, cold-hot, bitter-sweet and the rest; but single rule among them causes disease; the single rule amongst them (or: of either pair) is deleterious. Disease occurs sometimes from an internal cause such as excess of heat or cold, sometimes from an external cause such as excess or deficiency of food, sometimes in a certain part, such as blood, marrow or brain; but these parts also are sometimes affected by external causes, such as certain waters or a particular site or fatigue or constraint or similar reasons. But health is the symmetrical mixture of the qualities.

Both texts stand in no relation to the events in Ionia, but still give a chronological point of reference for the use of the concept around 500 BCE. Here Herodotus offers an extensive depiction. One could even say that isonomia in Ionia is one of the main characteristics of his narrative in the first six books of the history: he starts this depiction with the advice of Thales and Bias (1,170), continues it with the events in Samos following the overthrow of Polycrates (3,142) and makes it culminate at the beginning of the Ionian revolt (5,37) as well as after its conclusion (6,43). This continues as a theme throughout the entire 50-year history of Ionia, all the way to the reorganization after the defeat near Lade in 494 BCE.

Because in this context Herodotus also partially uses the term democracy, which arose much later, for today’s readers it isn’t always easy to recognize the specific historic context. However, the difficulty lies in the fact that the meaning of the concept of isonomia in light of
its scope is underestimated because, and most importantly, one always has the development in Athens in mind.

In order to explain this, here the very general meaning of isonomia should presented that is expressed in both of the earliest texts as well as in Herodotus: isonomia means the shifting of power towards the civil assembly including every male, adult citizen with the same right to vote. This is considered as a part of the nomos supported by the political society and is incompatible with any type of tyranny as well as individual prominence or individual decisions in political processes.

But this is not everything. One must take the far-reaching consequences into account that the execution in political praxis brought along with it: the virtual establishment of the right to vote always presumed a new distribution of the citizenry in subgroups in order to realize this equal right to vote, just as the changes in the structures of offices and the reform of the council towards a representative composition. These are all infrastructures of a political organizational form that one is only familiar with in this depth from Athens and since the Cleisthenic reforms.

However, this infrastructure is not to be considered identical with isonomia, but it is the immediate consequence of isonomia if the same participation contained in the concept is also to be practically realized. For that reason, one must conclude, on the one hand, that isonomia is a very wide-ranging organizational concept that is markedly stronger than the concept of ‘democracy’ in its influencing intentions and commitments. On the other hand, even the sheer fact of the mention that isonomia has been introduced in a given polis must mean that precisely the infrastructures named were in fact introduced or at least intended, or there was discussion about their introduction in the respective polis.

The fact that this isn’t farfetched for the 6th century is demonstrated by the famous inscription from Chios, which documents all of this long before Cleisthenes —in the desired depth of detail regarding political infrastructure, but without using the term ‘isonomia’:
further connected to the assumption that the Athenian isonomia, i.e. the associated with the infrastructural framework of political organization as described. This is point and going far beyond (which I also consider likely), is implicitly tied to the assumption tyranny, according to which the origin would be closer tied to aristocratic ideas of politics with the assumption that the understanding of isonomia arose out of a rejection of isonomia: with the assumpt

A second, equally grave objection is derived from the variants in interpretive spectrum of isonomia: with the assumption that the understanding of isonomia arose out of a rejection of tyranny, according to which the origin would be closer tied to aristocratic ideas of politics (which I also consider likely), is implicitly tied to the assumption – picking up on the previous point and going far beyond – that it should be ruled out that the Ionian isonomia was associated with the infrastructural framework of political organization as described. This is further connected to the assumption that the Athenian isonomia, i.e. the reforms of

A

[—]οντες: ἵστης δήμο
μήρας: φοιλασσοῦν —
—]ος: υπερ: ἢ μὲν
δημάρχους ἢ βασιλεύον: δικαιοθη —
[—]—]; ἵστης ἀποθότοι: δημάρχουν: ἔξηρχηται: τῶν
ἐξεπετήρην? —
[—]—] ἢ: δήμῳ κεκλημένη
ολοια μια: ἀλέρηση[η] —
[—]—] αὐτὴν παρῶλοιο[—]

(B) [...] if the case subject to appeal[
] but if he is wronged, before the demarchos, staters[

(C) let him appeal to the boule of the demos. On the third day after the Hebdomaia let the boule of the demos, with power to inflict penalties, assemble, chosen fifty from a phyle. Let it deal with the other affairs of the demos and all the cases subject to appeal in the month[

(D) ] let him make oaths[
] to the basileis[

The inscription reveals a political form of organization with an assembly and the council as the representative organ made of sub-groups, i.e. precisely the infrastructural elements that are necessary for practical realization of isonomia.

If one rejects the conclusion that the introduction of an isonomia led to drastic changes in the political infrastructure, then isonomia remains a strangely bloodless wording and it would also be hardly understandable why the introduction of this isonomia is almost always tied to cases of political overthrows or dramatic changes. Then one must in fact allege that Herodotus, our main source for isonomia in Ionia, rewrote the entire political history of Ionia in retrospect, although he is the only Greek author from whom we have any early prose text of substantial scope for this time. However, such skepticism is not surprising in light of the distrust of Herodotus’ methods that were widespread until recently.

A second, equally grave objection is derived from the variants in interpretive spectrum of isonomia: with the assumption that the understanding of isonomia arose out of a rejection of tyranny, according to which the origin would be closer tied to aristocratic ideas of politics (which I also consider likely), is implicitly tied to the assumption – picking up on the previous point and going far beyond – that it should be ruled out that the Ionian isonomia was associated with the infrastructural framework of political organization as described. This is further connected to the assumption that the Athenian isonomia, i.e. the reforms of
Cleisthenes, was fundamentally something else than the Ionian isonomia mentioned by Herodotus. If, on the contrary, it is accepted that Herodotus’ Ionian isonomiai are historically plausible, then this results in a completely different possibility for contextualizing the development of democracy.

**Herodotus’ depiction of Ionian isonomia**

Herodotus draws a great narrative arc from the first Persian dominance of Ionia by Cyrus through to the defeat of the Ionian revolt. Initially there was an assembly of the Ionian poleis in their federation, the Panionion. There Thales suggests establishing a common political organizational structure with a central, representative council setting up an assembly as its center, located in Teos, because it was the geographic center of Ionia, and the transformation of the poleis to demes, i.e. the introduction of a structural synoikismos. The council was based on the idea of the center as a point of symmetry, as one can also recognize in the cosmological models of the period, but also refers to a concept of political representation that makes the equality of all participants possible.

Even the suggestion presented by Bias that the Ionians should all migrate to Sardinia following their defeat near Lade in order for them to escape servitude with the Persians and be able to carry out life in eudaimonia, makes reference to this context: the eudaimonesein is a variant of life in equality, not aiming for economic equality, but still emphasizing the social components of this concept.

This development proceeds via multiple stations: following the death of Polycrates, the tyrant of Samos, his successor Mainadrios is said to have attempted to establish isonomia in Samos in 522 BCE.

Hdt. 3, 142,3: ἀρχὴν τὴν ἑκατέρας ἑσονομῆν υἱὸν προσφορεῶ. I now give the power into the meson, and proclaim to you isonomia.

This attempt fails because, as Herodotus puts it, the Samians apparently don’t even want freedom. Is this ‘a historicizing fiction’ from an anti-tyrannical rhetoric tradition?
other hand, Herodotus also describes the abdication of the Kos tyrant Cadmos (7,164,1) – around 500 BCE – with the same words,\textsuperscript{18} only that a generation later the people of Kos were clearly wiser than the people of Samos. The two stories are connected, reflect upon each other and if one considers one of them to be anachronistic, then it must also be true for the other.

During the Samos episode or even shortly after the Scythian campaign started by Dareios, the tyrants supported or installed by the Persians were supposed to watch over the bridge over the Istros, which was absolutely essential for the retreat of the Persian army. Miltiades, who became later the famous victor of the battle at Marathon, but at this time still tyrant on Thracian Chersones, suggests defecting from the Persians and liberating Ionia. Histiaeos, the tyrant of Miletus, replied by claiming that none of the tyrants would be able to survive in Ionia because then every polis that introduced democracy (\textit{δημοκρατεύεσθαι}) would prefer it over tyranny.\textsuperscript{19} This was convincing for all parties and the next chance for Ionia was lost. However, it is well-known that Miltiades returned to Athens some 20 years later and was a very successful, democratic legitimized strategist. As an achievement conducive to identity formation for the people of Athens, it was not only Marathon that established Athens as a power equal to Sparta, but also Miltiades’ turning to democracy. With this background, it is naturally clear that Herodotus is fully intentional in implying this cross-reference in the depiction of the bridge scenery. However, is this also fiction or does Herodotus aim to make a long historical lineage plausible?

Chronologically subsequent to the bridge discussion are the events in Athens with the overthrow of the tyrant and the Cleisthenic reforms (Hdt. 5,78 und 6,131), the political consequences of which the Spartans attempted to tamp down with the awoken self-trust of the Athenians. Yet the Corinthians know how to prevent this in the decisive assembly in the Peloponnesian Federation around 504 BCE by explicitly warning the Spartans to re-establish a tyrannical rule (5,92 α 1). This is followed by outbreak of the Ionian revolt, at the beginning of which the Milesian sub-tyrant abdicates in Miletus – as already mentioned (Hdt. 5,37) – and establishes isonomia. However, Herodotus emphasizes that Aristagoras abdicated his tyranny \textit{λόγῳ} (5,37,2). Who doesn’t immediately think of Thucydides’ obituary for Pericles (2,65,10) with this wording, according to which Athens \textit{λόγῳ μὲν δημοκρατία, ἐργῇ δὲ ὑπὸ τοῦ πρώτου ἄνδρὸς ἄρχῃ}? Here as well, for Herodotus the introduction of isonomia in the Ionian revolt appears to be a further missed chance for the Ionians. For in the end, the
establishment of democracies occur by the grace of Persia and not due to its own power: Mardonios removes all tyrants from Ionia and sets up a democratic constitution in each polis.

Mardonios however sailing along the coast of Asia came to Ionia: and here I shall relate a thing which will be a great marvel to those of the Hellenes who do not believe that to the seven men of the Persians Otanes declared as his opinion that the Persians ought to have popular rule; for Mardonios deposed all the despots of the Ionians and established popular governments in the cities.

If these depictions by Herodotus of the developments in Ionia are compared with the description of the Cleisthenic reform in 6,131, – admittedly very brief, but extremely clear– then it is immediately obvious that the advice of Thales and the core of the Cleisthenic measures have something decisive in common: Cleisthenes had established a new political organizational structure in Athens by combining the regions of Attica – comparable with a synoikismos. The Ionians, in contrast with the Athenians, did not go down this path. The Ionian Panionion could have become a truly successful koinon. Correspondingly, we know that the Ionian poleis took counsel together in their koinon (Hdt. 5,108,2), carried out mutual military activities (5,109,3) and had a shared army or rather coordinated fleet (Hdt. 6,7). But this is obviously not what constitutes a true koinon, according to Herodotus: in the case of Athens, for Herodotus the military successes of 504 BCE over the Spartans, Boeotians, and Chalcdians by noting that follows the isogoria for all (πανταχῇ ἡ ἱσηγορίη), used synonymously with isonomia here. This made Athens strong and successful over the development of individual interests. Individual interests and the overall situation influence each other, yet the process of identification with the new order of the polis (as pre-political foundation) is the prerequisite for the individual and makes overall military victory possible in the first place.

In contrast, Dionysios of Phocaea unsuccessful warnings before the battle of Lade (6,11) and the actions of the Ionians in the battle (6,13-15) show that the Ionians are lacking precisely in this consciousness of the community, resulting in the military defeat to the Persians. Tolerating difficulties and tribulations, which seemed like slavery to the ships’ crews, could only have been born with the sensitivity for the common good, resulting from the
consciousness of the community as a higher goal – but that is precisely what the Ionians are not capable of. Of course it is possible to regard the wording of Herodotus’ advice to the council of Thales as a projection after the fact, but it fits all too well as the starting point of all the failed Ionian isonomiai: while the Athenians succeed in achieving this consciousness of the community for forming a common political will, even to realize military success against the Persians, it is the Ionians who fail in exactly this point!

One has to add the most interesting text on isonomia from Herodotus, Otanes’ speech in the constitutional debate (3,80), which had led to endless discussions. It is also clear that this text reflects much about contemporary Athens of the Periclean era. At the same time it needs to be asked why Herodotus had placed this text in the third book, in the context of the seizure of power by Dareios, the decisive Persian counterpart of the Ionians. Here as well, it can be argued that one must view this as reflection with which the author Herodotus places the good and right arguments with much irony in the mouths of those who are then not able to convince the others.

The central passage in the constitutional debate is at the end of Otanes’ speech. The rule of the masses is an isonomia and it is characterized by the fact that βουλεύματα δὲ πάντα ἐς τὸ κοινὸν ἀναφέρει (3,80,6) and ἐν γὰρ τῷ πολλῷ ἐνὶ τὰ πάντα (for in the many the entirety). Here Herodotus does not even speak of special political constitutional forms in the sense of official structures or certain modes of election, entry qualifications, etc., instead he makes explicit mention of very fundamental things: the idea of the entirety, based on this consciousness of the community which is only made possible by a sense for the common good in contrast to the individual, is a clear political concept.

Thus, the political meaning of these texts is clear: isonomia and political organization of citizens has to be regarded as a koinon. Thus, koinon is to be understood as an expression of a form of political organization, and not as a mere constitution. And it goes far beyond the boundaries of the concept: it simply aims for the common good – resting on the premise of consciousness of the community, which characterizes the political form of organization in the first thing. The Athenians were able to achieve this, but the Ionians were not.

To that extent, Herodotus’ narrative proves to be stringent and plausible and the narrative has a claim to credibility purely on the basis of this plausibility.
Herodotus demonstrates that the creation of a political community is more than institutional organization of political processes: representation in the existential sense, not only in the organizational-political realm, but rather far beyond, containing precisely entirety, the common good – a real koinon. In this sense, action oriented on common good is also political action and for that reason, finds its expression in isonomia as the most beautiful of names!

Consequently, this means that with Thales in Ionia, at the latest, a concept of isonomia was discussed as a new concept of order that is based on a political expression of common good and consciousness of the community. If this is then examined together with the inscription from Chios, which gives us insight into the organizational infrastructure as the basis of a political order in the 2nd quarter or around the middle of the 6th century in Ionia, then it can be concluded that the political concept of isonomia arose in Ionia of the 6th century. Thus, it is true: not only ex Ionia scientia, but also ex Ionia isonomia.

1 Raaflaub/ Ober / Wallace (2007).
7 Translated by C.D.Yonge 1854 (modified).

(A) ] of Hestia, observing the rhetrai of the demos
] (rhetra) which will declare; if a man who is demarchos or basileus[ ] of Hestia let the man who is demarchos grant to exact[ ] in the presence of the demos having been summoned ...
] double penalty
(B) ] if the case subject to appeal[ ] but if he is wrongdoing, before the demarchos, states[ ]
(C) ] let him appeal to the boule of the demos. On the third day after the Hebdomaia let the boule of the demos, with power to inflict penalties, assemble, chosen fifty from a phyle. Let it deal with the other affairs of the demos and all the cases subject to appeal in the month[ ]
(D) ] Artemision[ ] let him make oaths[ ] to the basileis[ ]
A very free translation: J. Oliver, Text of the So-Called Constitution of Chios from the First Half of the Sixth Century B.C., AJPh 80, 3 (1959) 296-301:
As for property sacred to Hestia, (the official) shall constantly observe rhetras of the demos and shall give an order that such and such be sacred by separately citing the rhetra which will so declare. If a demarch or baseleus levies a tithe, he shall hand over, while he is in office, what Hestia gets. The auditor shall exact it in the presence of a convocation of the demos.
The council which will judge appeals shall be a council from the demos. And in case one claims that an unjust sentence has been given, he shall deposit so many staters with the demarch and shall appeal to the council which is from the demos. On the third day after the Hebdomaia there shall regularly be a gathering of this council which represents the demos, has power to impose fines and is to be empaneled by a selection of fifty men from each tribe. It shall transact the other business of the demos and particularly decide all cases of the month which may occur as appeals.

10 Cartledge (2009): „for what in practice was to count as an ‘equal’ sharing of power, and who were the ‘people’ entitled to share it?” and: „Iso-nomia stood for the most general and unspecific principle of political equality;“. Cf. Persia (Hdt. 3,80), Samos (Hdt. 3,142), Ionien (4,137), Miletus and Ionia (Hdt. 5,37), Athens (Hdt. 5,78; 6,43 und 6,131), Kos (Hdt. 7,164); and also Hdt. 5,92.
12 Pars pro toto: Kienast (2002) 9f.
13 Asheri 2007, ad loc. 191.
16 Hdt. 3, 142-146.
18 Hdt. 7, 164,1: ἐκών τε εἶναι καὶ δεινοῦ ἐπίστοις οὐδένος ἀλλ’ ὑπὸ δικαιοσύνης ἐς μέσον Κύριου καταθεῖς τὴν ὑφήλην ὑπέτει ἐς Ἐκελίνην.
19 Hdt. 4, 137,2: βουλήσεις ἐγὼ ἐκάστην τῶν πολίων δημοκρατέσθαι μᾶλλον ἡ τυραννεύεσθαι.
21 Hdt. 9, 122.