

THE HISTORIES

Herodotus

*With an Introduction and Notes
by Donald Lateiner*

*Translated by G. C. Macaulay and
Revised throughout by Donald Lateiner*

George Stade
Consulting Editorial Director



BARNES & NOBLE CLASSICS
NEW YORK

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FROM THE PAGES OF THE HISTORIES

“Men trust their ears less than their eyes.”

(1.8)

“When a woman puts off her tunic she puts off her modesty also.”

(1.8)

“In peace the sons bury their fathers, but in war the fathers bury their sons.”

(1.87)

They are wont to deliberate when drinking hard about the most important of their affairs, and whatever conclusion has pleased them, this on the next day, when they are sober, the master of the house where they happen to deliberate lays before them for discussion. If it pleases them when they are sober also, they adopt it, but if it does not please them, they let it go. Whatever they have had their first deliberation on when they are sober, they consider again when they are drinking.

(1.133)

For great wrongs great also are the penalties which come from the gods.

(2.120)

“To be envied is better than to be pitied.”

(3.52)

“Insolence is engendered in him by the good things which he possesses, and envy is implanted in man from the beginning; and having these two things, he has all vice.”

(3.80)

“The most valuable of all possessions is a friend who is a man of understanding and also sincere and well-disposed.”

(5.24)

“God strikes with thunderbolts the creatures which stand above the rest and suffers them not to make

proud show; while those which are small do not provoke him to jealousy.”

(7.10)

“The hastening of any matter breeds disasters.”

(7.10)

“Misfortunes falling upon us and diseases disturbing our happiness make the time of life, though short indeed, seem long: thus, since life is full of trouble, death has become the most acceptable refuge for man.”

(7.46)

“Accidents will rule the men and not men the accidents.”

(7.49)

“Great power is in general gained by running great risks.”

(7.50)

These neither snow nor rain nor heat nor darkness of night prevents from accomplishing each one the task proposed to him. with the very utmost speed.

(8.98)

“The power of the king is above that of a man and his arm is very long.”

(8.140)

“The most hateful grief of all human griefs is this, to have knowledge of the truth but no power over the event.”

(9.16)

“From lands which are not rugged men who are not rugged are apt to come forth.”

(9.122)

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HERODOTUS

Little information exists about the life of Herodotus, the Father of History, except what we can glean from his writing. In or around 484 B.c. he was born in Asia Minor in the Carian town of Halicarnassos (now Bodrum, Turkey), at that time a Greek city-state under the rule of the Persian Empire. His father was Greek; the family was a prominent one. Herodotus had a brother, Theodorus, and was related to an epic poet, Panyassis, whose works are lost. Panyassis took part in an uprising against the Persians in 457 B.C. It is thought that at this time Herodotus, perhaps because of his own support for the revolt, left Halicarnassos for the Ionian island of Samos.

Herodotus appears to have traveled widely. He first visited Susa and Babylon in Persia (modern Iran). After 460 B.c. he traveled to Egypt (as far south as modern Aswan), North Africa, the Greek islands and mainland, Scythia (parts of modern Ukraine, Russia, and Kazakhstan), and Colchis (modern Georgia). His modes of travel remain unclear, although his attention to commerce suggests he may have journeyed on merchant ships. Around 449 or 448, he probably would have composed some of the books of his *Histories* and perhaps began to “publish” his work in the manner of the time—that is, by reciting it.

Around 447 B.c. he went to Athens, led at the time by Pericles. In Athens, Herodotus would have associated with the orator Antiphon, the musician Damon, the philosophers Protagoras and Zeno, and the playwrights Euripides and Sophocles. There are late reports of Herodotus reading to an audience that included the young Thucydides, who later became the principal historian of the Peloponnesian War. But Herodotus was not a citizen of Athens, and it was difficult to become one. In 443 he joined a group of colonists setting out to found the colony of Thurii in southern Italy and became a citizen of that new town, where he most likely expanded and polished the *Histories*. He died in Thurii in 425 B.C.

The subject of Herodotus’ *Histories* (in Greek the word means “inquiries”) is the twenty years (490–479 B.C.) of war between Greece and Persia for domination of the Greek world. He broke new ground in looking to past events for the roots of the conflict and incorporating in his accounts surrounding information that shed light on the conduct of the war and the personalities of those who waged it. Unlike Homer, whose epics about the past were based on legend and myth, Herodotus also gathered evidence firsthand from personal accounts and from his observation of places, monuments, and works of art. Herodotus had an appreciation for a good story, and many fascinating tales are sprinkled throughout the *Histories*, including many the historian himself may not have fully believed.

Without Herodotus’ *Histories*, we would have no written record of the pivotal historical events of the Greco-Persian Wars. In addition to that invaluable contribution, Herodotus has given us a lively compendium of ancient personalities and events that we can read for pleasure, amazement, and edification.

THE WORLD OF HERODOTUS AND THE *HISTORIES*

- 560- Croesus, wealthy king of Lydia, in Asia Minor, conquers coastal
547
B.C. Ionia, where many Hellenic communities have been established.
- 547 The Persian king Cyrus overthrows Croesus.
- 522 Dareios I usurps the Persian throne.
- 512 Dareios crosses the Bosphorus and subdues Thrace (modern Turkey, northeastern Greece, and parts of Bulgaria).
- c.500 Hecataios writes *Genealogies* and *Journey Around the Lands*; the
B.C. first prose writing in Greece, *Genealogies* is an attempt to trace the mythological roots of several Greek families. Pythagoras, the influential mathematician and philosopher, dies around this time, and the philosopher Anaxagoras, the sculptor Phidias, and the future Athenian ruler Pericles are born. The Ionians attempt to overthrow their Persian rulers, in what is known as the Ionian Revolt.
- 499 Persia attacks the Greek island of Naxos in the Aegean Sea. The Ionians capture and burn Sardis, the Persian-controlled capital of Lydia.
- 497 Greece and Persia fight battles in Cyprus and adjoining sea territories.
- 496 The playwright Sophocles is born.
- c.495 The philosopher Zeno, founder of the dialectic, is born.
- 494 Persia destroys Miletus, in Asia Minor, ending the Ionian Revolt and restoring Persian dominance over the Hellenic cities in Ionia.
- c. 493 The tragedian Phrynichus writes and stages *Sack of Miletus*, a moment in Attic tragic history mentioned by Herodotus (6.21).
- 490 Persia invades Greece, and the Persian Wars begin; they will continue for more than forty years, with the heaviest, European-based fighting continuing until 479 B.C. The Athenians and Plataians win the battle of Marathon. The philosopher Empedocles is born.
- 486 Dareios dies. His son Xerxes succeeds him. The poet Anacreon dies.
- c.484 Herodotus is born in Halicarnassos, a Greek colony in Caria, in Persian-controlled Asia Minor. The playwright Euripides is born.
- Representatives from many Greek cities meet in Corinth, resolving to set aside their

481 internal disputes and unite against the Persian invasion.

480 The Persians annihilate the troops of King Leonidas of Sparta at Thermopylai. Under the leadership of Xerxes, Persian troops severely damage and occupy Athens. Greek naval troops win a battle with the Persians in the straits of Salamis, near Athens; it is the first great naval conflict to be recorded in history. Buddha dies around this time.

479 The Greeks defeat the Persians by land at Plataia and by sea at Mycale. This year marks the end of the most intensive, European based fighting of the Persian Wars; sporadic conflict occurs in Asia Minor until 449 B.C. Confucius dies.

478 An alliance of Greek cities under the leadership of Athens, known as the Delian League, is founded to avenge the destruction caused by Persia and to regain formerly Greek-owned cities under Persian control. Athens takes control of Byzantium.

475 Phrynichus' Persian War tragedy *Phoenissae* (*Phoenician Women*) is staged.

472 Aeschylus' dramatic tragedy *Persians* is staged.

470 Socrates is born.

468 The poet Simonides dies; he wrote and memorialized the Spartan expeditionary force that defended the pass at Thermopylai.

466 Greek troops under the Athenian Cimon defeat the Persians at the river Eurymedon.

c.465 Earthquakes rock Sparta. Xerxes is assassinated and succeeded by his son Artaxerxes.

c.464 Herodotus begins to travel around the known world.

461 Pericles begins his rise to power in Athens.

460 Hippocrates, the "Father of Medicine," is born. The philosopher Democritus is born. Thucydides, the historian of the Peloponnesian War, is born around this time.

458 Aeschylus stages his trilogy the *Oresteia*.

457 In Halicarnassos, a relative of Herodotus and perhaps the future historian himself take part in a revolt against Persian rule. Herodotus leaves Halicarnassos for the Ionian island of Samos.

456 Aeschylus dies.

454 Athens is defeated in Egypt.

c.450 Aristophanes is born.

449 The Greek navy defeats the Persians at Salamis, a city in Cyprus. The Persian Wars end with the Peace of Callias, in which Persia recognizes the independence of Greek cities,

especially those of Asia Minor.

449- Herodotus perhaps begins to recite his Histories.

448

447 He travels to Athens, where he continues to recite his work.

443 Herodotus joins a group from Athens that founds the Hellenic colony of Thurii in southern Italy.

c.441 Sophocles' *Antigone* is staged; it contains scenes related to incidents in the Histories.

431 The Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta begins; it will be recorded by Herodotus' successor Thucydides. Euripides' *Medea* is staged.

429 Pericles dies.

c.428-
427 Plato is born.

425 Aristophanes' *The Archarnians* is staged; it parodies the opening of Herodotus' Histories.

424 Thucydides is exiled from Athens.

414 Herodotus dies in Thurii. (Many sources give 425 as the year he died; the date 414 is based on references by Aristophanes and on recent historiographical work showing Herodotus' awareness of and reflections on events that took place after 425.)

INTRODUCTION

The wrecked central figure of the novel *The English Patient* (1992) has nothing to establish his identity, in his Florentine World War II hospital, other than a battered and interleaved copy of the *Histories of Herodotus*. Throughout the novel, Herodotus is quoted, described, and used as an analog for fascination with the desert, interest in love and war, and wisdom on human happenstance. Indeed, author Michael Ondaatje's acknowledgment makes clear that the character Almásy had in hand the very translation you now hold, George C. Macaulay's. The story of the Lydian king Candaules, his trusted spearman Gyges, and the king's wife (told at 1.8-12) parallels the tale of the erotic threesome featured in Ondaatje's novel.

"Herodotus sometimes writes for children and sometimes for philosophers," said the greatest modern historians, Edward Gibbon (*The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 1776-1788, chapter 24, note 54). Casual and serious readers alike have loved the first historian, the inventor of history, for his narrative genius and tragicomic view of human events, great and small. He has been equally criticized and damned by professional historians, ethnographers, and geographers for errors of fact and method, and even for his Greek. Cicero was not the first to call him "the father of lies." The German scholar Detlev Fehling (see "For Further Reading") actually avers that he never left Greece perhaps even his Anatolian study, copying others' lies and travelers' tales, inventing claims of visits to exotic places and familiar monuments, and fabricating hundreds of alleged sources.

Whereas other ancient historians who followed his large footsteps narrowed their scope in terms of topic (Thucydides, Polybius, Sallust), time (Theopompus, Livy, Tacitus), or territory (the local historians, such as those of Athens, the Attidographers, or the chroniclers of other *poleis*), Herodotus Homerically encompasses vast realms in topic, time, and territory. After leaving his birthplace Halicarnassos on the western edge of Asia Minor (Anatolia, now roughly Turkey), he sailed on various voyages, perhaps as a merchant, south to Egypt, east to Sidon, north to the Hellespont and Black Sea, and west to Italy and Sicily. He then traveled inland in all these directions, although one cannot always separate his reports based on personal visits from what he heard or thought he heard, through interpreters who were sometimes comparatively informed and sometimes no better than local lounge lizards eager to help a tourist. He saw the earth beneath his feet and existing structures at Delphi, Marathon, and Delos. He traveled to the edges of the known and unknown inhabited world in Egypt and Italy, and around the Black Sea. He heard about Spain, Babylon (in modern Iraq), Afghanistan, cold Britain, and the hot Sahara. This last region, described with wonder and some disparagement in the latter half of book IV, is crucial to the story of Ondaatje's protagonist in *The English Patient*, a Central European explorer of North Africa. Herodotus was his guide in those vast spaces, and he was never separated from this talisman, a kind of Bible for his restless search in life.

Herodotus—the inquirer, evaluator, and judge (a combination of the three is what "historian" means in Greek)—tells us what he observed. He saw pyramids, inscriptions, and other natural and artificial alterations of the environment. He heard facts and fictions from combatants, travelers, and survivors. He gathered legends and anecdotes from oral traditional tales. And he surmised certain things to be possible or probable from his own penetrating critiques of humans, their normal and odd behavior, and their environment. Some of his alleged errors turn out to be misunderstandings of what he wrote. Some real errors (such as his disbelief [4.42] in the possibility of Phoenician circumnavigation

Africa) derive from his honest mistakes in a young and illiterate world without prose books—his work is one of the first and certainly the most ambitious work of research to his day

Notwithstanding the somewhat exceptional case of the Athenians and the unavailability of scribed records of the Eastern autocracies, his world possessed few public records, no libraries or databases, only many personal and parochial biases and foreign tongues. His sources and source materials include Egyptian, African, Persian, Phoenician, Scythian, Celtic, and Ethiopian as well as Greek information. For one exotic example, his account of gold-digging, furry giant ants in the northeastern corner of the Persian Empire (Pactyike; 3.102-105) may have misreported, through many intermediate sources, the habits of a larger animal. The large burrowing marmots of the Dansar plateau, which overlooks the Indus in Kashmir, may have given rise to Herodotus' bizarre account of mining insects (see Michel Peissel's *The Ants' Gold: The Discovery of the Greek El Dorado in the Himalayas* (1984) and an article by Marlise Simons ("Gold-Digging Ants' Mystery Seems Solved, After Bugging Scholars for Centuries"; *New York Times*, November 25, 1996). In "The Place of Herodotus in the History of Historiography," the eminent student of ancient historiography Arnaldo Momigliano wrote, "If we had to give an *a priori* estimate of ... success in writing history by Herodotus' method, we should probably shake our heads in sheer despondency."

Life

Herodotus is a reclusive personality, despite the frequent intrusion of the pronoun "I" in his text. He generously tells us much about the claims of other men, many cities, and tribes about their origins and achievements but offers little about himself. He says nothing directly of his ethnicity or his family or his personality. His first sentence may report that his home-city was Halicarnassos, now in coastal southwestern Turkey (an ancient Dorian Greek colony), but another manuscript tradition reports that he was from Thurii (in coastal southern Italy, a recent Athenian colonial outpost in Herodotus' time) as his residence. His probable life span was from 484 to 414 B.C. (many sources give 425 as the year Herodotus died; the date 414 is based on references by Aristophanes and on recent historiographic work showing Herodotus' awareness of and reflections on events that took place after 425). Her reticence trumps even his evidence when he parenthetically informs us (2.143) that, unlike Hecataeus, his predecessor in touring Egyptian Thebes and reporting it, he did not recount his own genealogy or that of the antiquarian Egyptian priests. "The authorial I," the many first-person pronouns and verbs in his text—more than one thousand, according to Carolyn Dewald ("Narrative Surface and Authorial Voice in Herodotus' *Histories*," pp. 147-170, and "'I didn't give my own genealogy': Herodotus and the Authorial Personality," p. 271)—do not produce confessions or much self-revelation. Indeed, the story proves that pioneering Hecataios had made a fool of himself and his nation's supposed "history" in Egypt, and Herodotus did not imitate his Greek predecessor's historical shortsightedness. Other emphatic insertions of his views in the text are unexpected and infrequent: his polemical insistence on the historical reality of the Persian debate about possible forms of government—monarchy, oligarchy, and democracy (3.80), the fact that the Persians treated the Ionians gently and that their viceroys installed local democracies (6.42-43), the reality of the traitorous Marathon shield-signal (6.121-124) and his pleasant chortles at Athenian superstition (1.59) and at the Athenian democracy's political gullibility (5.97).

The great historiographer Felix Jacoby assiduously collected the references to Herodotus' travels and the objects he observed ("Herodot," cols. 247-281), but this does not add up to even a snapshot

the author. Other rare sources for information about his life are quite late—Hellenistic and Roman imperial—and not worth much credence. What they report is frequently no more than what one can extract or extrapolate from his text. Thucydides, who might have told us most (one anecdote reports him hearing with admiration the elder historian recite from his work), never mentions Herodotus by name. He barely notices any other prose writer, but he certainly alludes to Herodotus' results and his method, falsely minimizing the length of the earlier conflict between the Persians and the Greeks (1.23) and directly and obliquely criticizing the research methods by which Herodotus (and other historians such as Hellanicos) had pursued their historical investigations. But very few historians meet Thucydides' demanding standards.

Character of the Author

Herodotus was, to judge solely from his text, well traveled, urbane, tolerant, curious about everything, and able to find amusement and dismay in the foibles of his fellow men and women. Like Voltaire, he recognized the compromises that survival and prosperity demand. I think many people today would enjoy his open-minded company. He often noted how, for individuals and states, intention outpaces execution and how the law of unexpected consequences can deceive powerful people and nations. Scoundrels sometimes do good despite themselves, and heroes are not rarely humiliated by the unpredictable element in human life. This is not a philosophy—merely a historically observed reality.

Herodotus values the personally detached but politically and intellectually engaged persona of the investigator that he has created. His self-effacing text more frequently offers the reader the voice of the impersonal presentation and the neutral observer than the subjective evaluator, but both voices are always present. In the second book, on Egypt, he is lavish in applying superlatives such as “cleverest,” “largest,” “most expensive,” “most worthy of seeing”—in part because wonderful Egypt invited such language and thinking.

History, as perceptive readers now more often recognize, is many different things. It is the vanished events of the past, what participants in those events “remember” or claim, and the preserved contemporary—and often intentionally false or misleading—records of those events. (Consider Octavian's [the emperor Augustus'] self-composed and finally, throughout three continents of the Roman Empire, imposed inscriptional autobiography, *Achievements of the Divinized Augustus*.) Finally, to keep the description of these issues relatively simple, we lump together here another historiographic category: all later records and historical accounts that are subject to ethnic or nationalist bias or the necessary misperceptions arising from the particular circumstances of even an honest, hypothetically unself-interested writer.

Political Views

One can confidently say that Herodotus did not admire the political organizations of the Eastern “hydraulic civilizations” (centralized bureaucracies based on complete control of essential water resources)—autocracies, tyrannies, and monarchies. Not that he was so foolish as to think, as we apparently do, that a form of government that is successful in the context of one economy and ecology and transport network could be easily transplanted to another. Direct Athenian democracy suggested to him both weaknesses (5.97) and strengths. The tightly controlled Spartan totalitarian state (with two kings, a small senate, and a nondebating soldier-assembly) both appealed and appalled. The other

Greeks found it fascinating, but none were invited to live there, and few, if any, would have accepted such an invitation.

Herodotus saw the good in various government systems that permitted free expression (isegorie) and equal justice under law (isonomie). He was no ideologue for democracy, oligarchy, timocracy, or plutocracy. His reticence to speak about ahistorical religious beliefs and practices is explicit (see 2.134 and 9.65). He applies his experience-based relativism, which is clearest when he describes religious practices (3.38), equally to politics (7.152), aesthetics, various ethnic customs (marriage, burial), and different belief-systems.

He describes noble peasants and brutal royals. The man who saved Greece (Themistocles) can also be portrayed as self-serving and even treasonous. Herodotus' Spartans are brave, suitably laconic (a word derived from their famous ethnic distrust of discourse), often late for battle, invincible but also unappreciative of their occasionally eccentric fellow citizens and their economically productive underclass, the helots. Herodotus finds admirable actions in autocrats and nasty faults among the gentlefolk. Without the sometimes pseudo-objectivity of Thucydides or the selfless image of the self-propagandizing Julius Caesar (both employing the third person for their own presence in the narratives), Herodotus attains a real, because self-aware, objectivity. Some have blamed him for this evenhandedness, alleging excessive Athenian bias or pro-barbarian leaning—for example, Plutarch, who resented Herodotus' negative portrait of Plutarch's fellow Boeotians who joined the "national enemy Xerxes' invading forces. The truth is not always attractive or likable.

Religious Conceptions

Many critics and other readers have found Herodotus to be a deeply religious chap, indeed even superstitious about the causes and outcome of the conflicts that he records (for example, Mikalson, *Herodotus and Religion in the Persian Wars*, p. 187). His avowed interest in the cults, spiritual beliefs, and beliefs about spirits manifested by his varied Greek, half-Greek, non-Greek, and "marginal" ethnic subjects is undeniable. This curiosity about ceremonies, oracles, omens, prophets, dreams, and divine attributes, however, does not define his own beliefs any more than a Methodist missionary or a Roman Catholic priest on African assignment delimits or describes his own forms of spirituality when he records the allegedly magical practices of a Bantu witch. Divine interference is sometimes claimed by his characters or by his sources, but this ploy can be but a means to achieve patently fraudulent purposes—for example, Peisistratos' charade (1.59) or Dareios' "divinely sanctioned" accession (3.84-87). Herodotus himself on occasion observes a metaphysical tisis ("compensation" or "rebalancing"). This Heraclitan and Toynbeeian principle evens out high and low, power and weakness over time, sometimes in the apparent service of justice, always reestablishing some equilibrium of forces. (Many people since, both the religiously inclined and secular humanists, have imagined the same cosmic dynamic in the defeat and death of the Nazi juggernaut of Adolf Hitler.) Herodotus' inquisitiveness about the world justly extends to the observable, human phenomena of religious practice. He keeps various mystery cults' secrets secret and truncates other inquiries that verge into nonhistorical issues—see, for example, 2.3, 2.51, 2.171, 3.98, 6.124, 7.185, 8.112, and 9.84.

Herodotus never describes the Greek gods interfering in human actions (as they do not infrequently in Homer's narratives), and this silence or search for natural and human causes is a large historic advance. No divinity or person, no status, caste, or culture holds the only key to cosmic power, earthly piety, or human virtue. Divine intentions appear in some of his speculations, but never without

separate human independent agency His powerful speculations redirected historical thought.

Physical Form of the Histories

An ancient “book” had no spine, since it existed in rolls or volumes rather than our codex format bound pages. Further, it displayed no title page or ISBN number, and it carried a very high price tag. Each “book” had to be laboriously copied, written out by hand. Herodotus’ magisterial first sentence names the author, the hometown, the work, and his several comprehensive purposes (see below compare Flory, “Who Read Herodotus’ Histories?”). The current division into nine books, named pointlessly after the nine Muses, an organization canonized in Egyptian Alexandria 300 or more years later, is most probably not the original. That first papyrus mega-text may have appeared in three times as many “books.” Some divisions make little sense by our contemporary criteria (book 8 was divided from book 9 in mid-sentence in the original Greek, but some endings arrive at suitable pause points). The reader must imagine a stack of rolled papyrus manuscripts before conventions of titling, dividing, copying, and disseminating were established.

We do not know who were the first readers of the physically unwieldy text we call the Histories or the History. We do not know that the author himself gave it any title—other than the first sentence. Stewart Flory estimates (pp.13-14) that the text would require 300 feet of papyrus divided into thirty rolls or volumes and an unknown number of marked divisions (not the nine “books” already known). The second-century comic essayist Lucian, who describes them in his *Herodotus* 1-2). Aristophanes perhaps alludes to the Histories in his next comedies *The Acharnians* (verses 68-92 and 523-528) and *The Birds* (verses 1124-1138), although the meanings of his comic swipe for evaluating Herodotus’ reputation or notoriety are unclear. A steady reading aloud of the full text would take more than fifty hours—it is not, then, an entertainment for a crowd. All books were generally read aloud in antiquity, even by those perusing them alone, and Herodotus’ Ionic Greek does roll sweetly off the tongue. The cumbersome whole could never have been memorized like the shorter and rhythmic *Iliad* or *Odyssey*. Plutarch and Dio Chrysostom mention legendary recitations, in whole or part, by the author of this heavily researched work at Olympia, Athens, and elsewhere. Such performances do not find a good parallel in tag-team Homeric epic recitations to the illiterate at panhellenic festivals, or in group-trained and polis-paid performances of Attic drama, or in brief solo lyric performances by musical stars.

Herodotus’ astonishing product presumes significant Hellenic literacy and a book trade. More books were documentary, however, than literary, and more of the latter were poetry than prose, as Flory notes. Herodotus’ work was a “sport” in his own lifetime, thirty times longer than an Athenian tragedy, never performed, as the tragedies were in his day, for an audience of 14,000 Athenians. It was accessible therefore only to the educated Athenian elite. It was never anyone’s popular entertainment but a challenging mental activity for the few erudite readers available. Standing on the threshold of a wider spread of readers and literature, Herodotus invented a new kind and length of book, as well as a new access to the past. He relates that political and cultural information to his present (see Flory) and fleshed it out to mean something still worth reading for subsequent generations, including ours.

Plan of the Histories

In brief, Herodotus wrote a series of ethnographies with interwoven history (of Persia, Sparta, Athen

from about 560 to 490 B.C.) in the first four books, the first half of the Histories. In the last five books, the second half, the narrative becomes a more unified, more focused, generally continuous account of a war between a jerry-rigged Greek alliance and a Persian Empire governed from the top down. Some of the ethnographies are very short (the Auseans, at 4.180, a page), and some fill a book (the Egyptians, all of book II, seventy-five pages) or a large part of one (the Scythians, 4.1-144; the Lydians, 1.6-94: 1.6-92 providing a history and 1.93-94 the ethnographic particulars; and the Libyan—that is, all North Africans—4.145-205 with interruptions). When the Persian commanders subjugated various peoples for their empire, Herodotus describes the victims' national histories, such as those that could be recovered, and their customs. Herodotus' method is deliberate and habitual, although not one of those later to be canonized by the differently organizing historical minds of Thucydides, Ephorus, the Hellenistic Polybius, or the Roman Tacitus, or modern historians such as Edward Gibbon, Leopold von Ranke, Arnold Toynbee, or Steven Ambrose (as Robin Collingwood argues in *The Idea of History*). Herodotus coordinated reams of facts and explanations in his work in a way that remains vivid and convincing. When it can be tested, it stands up remarkably well, in the West and in the East. The result was no accident, as John Denniston (*Greek Prose Style*) and John Myres (*Herodotus, Father of History*) realized. The first-time reader will puzzle over Herodotus' ways of connecting topics or resuming one after an "interruption"—for example, the Chinese-box or archaic Greek "ring composition" technique of ABCBA (see Immerwahr, *Form and Thought in Herodotus*). If attentive, however, the reader will soon become comfortable with the author's coherent and consistent modes of exposition, such as prospective and retrospective "glosses" or pointers (see the insights of Rosalind Munson in *Telling Wonders*).

Speech and Other Direct Quotation

Ancient texts did not have our convention of quotation marks for "direct speech"—that is, words quoted verbatim. Modern readers and historians understand quotation marks to indicate material spoken or written in precisely the form presented. Along with quotations, Herodotus supplies other reports, abstracts of speeches, and summarized views, which was presented in ancient texts as "indirect speech"—for example, "Churchill said that the English would fight on the beaches, etc." Modern translations of ancient texts employ quotation marks for ancient direct speech, but readers need to understand that the ancient historians employed different conventions. Ancient authors write what appear to be the very words in the original tenses of someone's remarks, and so they offer a lively reconstruction (following the speech-rich epic convention found in the texts of Homer's poems) of what "must" or "should" have been said. They do not thereby claim that they know that Xerxes or Leonidas ever said exactly what is reported—the *ipsissima verba* or very words.

Sources

Herodotus names many sources, literary, documentary, oral, and material. His accounts of Persian tribute and the Persian royal post (3.89-97 and 8.98—words from the latter are recorded in the stone architrave of Manhattan's old main Post Office), and the battle numbers and lineup of the Greeks who fought the Persians (8.43 for Salamis, 9.28 for Plataia) seem, because of their unexpected detail, to be based on written records. These documents can be archival records from Dareios' and Xerxes' palaces at Persepolis; inscriptions on stone records and dedications (twenty of these—for example, in 2.10

and 4.91); legends and types on gold, silver, and other coins; some archaeological remains, such as extant and ruined structures (8.53); and more recent commemorative monuments (see 7.228 and 9.84; the latter describes the Serpent Column, still extant and for millennia on display in Istanbul). Some inscriptions were written in Greek and others in languages presumably unknown to Herodotus, including Egyptian, “Assyrian,” as he styles them, and old Persian, the latter for the account of Darius’ rise to power, if Herodotus knew anything of the Behistun inscription (a massive rock-cut inscription and set of bas-reliefs extant still in Iran; relevant at 3.68-87) and did not merely hear of it from an oral informant. His literary sources include prose writers and poets. Among the first we could mention the geographer and mythographer Hecataios and perhaps the explorer and geographer Skylax (compare 4.44; see Drews, *The Greek Accounts of Eastern History*, and Luraghi’s collection of essays in *The Historian’s Craft in the Age of Herodotus*). Among the second are Sappho, Pindar, and Aeschylus, the tragedian, who perhaps fought the invader at Marathon and Salamis and then wrote the Persian plays (see Lateiner, *The Historical Method of Herodotus*, pp. 91-108).

Most of Herodotus’ sources were certainly oral: individuals and groups with whom he spoke, such as the descendants of the Spartans who died at Thermopylai (7.224), or acquaintances of participants in the battle at Marathon or Salamis (Epizelos at 6.117 and Dicaeos at 8.65). Herodotus pauses to note (2.99) when his sources for Egyptian information change from his own observation (*autopsy* is the Greek term) to hearsay. In between come eyewitness reports, an invaluable but slippery source for particular events.

The impersonal voice presents hundreds of Hellenic and barbarian partisan and partial accounts, some preserved in writing (see Drews) but more collected from oral informants. More than two hundred sources are identified with some specifics (individuals sometimes by name, but more often “the Egyptians say,” “the Samians claim,” “it is said by the Persians,” etc.). Sources are not rarely entirely anonymous (more than one hundred such citations). Specific informants are generally mentioned because they disagree. Some sources are cited for expert knowledge, others because of their presence at events where particular actions are disputed, such as what part the Corinthians played at the battle of Salamis (8.94). Herodotus both names some sources (unlike the suppressive Thucydides) and leaves their conflicting versions side by side within his text for the reader to decide among (for example, 3.122, 4.195, 6.75, 8.87, again unlike Thucydides’ standard “magisterial” practice). The audience is able to form an independent opinion; it does not need to depend on the judgment of fallible observers or self-appointed authorities (for an extensive inventory, see Lateiner, pp. 84-90).

Citation itself may have been a Herodotean innovation. Among his unnamed sources—and perhaps we should think of these as his intellectual context—are nonhistorical writers and thinkers who influenced his *Histories*. These include the so-called pre-Socratic philosophers, the itinerant Sophists such as Protagoras, the Hippocratic medical writers, and other investigators working in scientific fields such as geology and climatology (as Rosalind Thomas has demonstrated in *Herodotus and the Context*).

Herodotus weighs the conflicting accounts, judges them, and when the evidence permits, accepts one or none of them. Whether or not he explicitly selects one, or elements of several, among the logoi he received—and he is more transparent about his procedure here than Thucydides and the rest of his alleged successors—he creates his own account from the congeries and from self-revealing silences. That narrator’s account therefore encompasses the polyphony of his sources. Although managing the living historical tradition—including, excluding explicitly, ordering, sequencing

admitting a failure to find a dependable account, etc.—Herodotus does not suppress the data that he has excavated, the *histor*'s (investigator's) spade-work. By telling the reader when he is supervising the sometimes rambunctious logoi (by means of metanarrative signposting—see, for example, 1.92.43, 4.10-11, 4.30, 5.62, and 9.84; compare Munson, pp. 20-24 and 32-37, and Dewald, “‘I didn't give my own genealogy’: Herodotus and the Authorial Personality,” pp. 274-276), Herodotus preserves (or encourages us to believe that he preserves) the autonomy of future readers and investigators.

Nevertheless, Herodotus' lively mind seeps through his story—that is, a narrator's persona emerges in the text, however true or untrue it may be to the personality of the dead author. That persona can be combative, dispensing praise and blame to other researchers as well as to the veterans and politicians still fighting the last generation's battles. He admires clear thinkers and clever tricksters like the Halicarnassian queen Artemisia; he (intermittently) defends the Athenian general and later turncoat Themistocles, and he respects the exiled Spartan king Demaratos (compare Boedeker, “The Two Faces of Demaratus”), an eloquent Laconian.

Chronology

Herodotus, like other Greeks, considered certain mythical and legendary events to be part of some recoverable history, the distant but real past—for example, the Trojan War (2.145) and perhaps Minos and his navy (3.122). However, he saw the need to treat those spectacular wars and god-infected stories of heroic expeditions with a pinch of salt—or a chariotful. He distinguishes (unlike his predecessors and his contemporaries) the mythical and even earlier historical pasts from the investigable past. He divides the mythical heroes from the more dependably verifiable past stretching back approximately one hundred years. For this era some reliable evidence and reports exist (although not necessarily reliable methods for interpreting them). Since Herodotus worked without having chronicles at hand for Greek or Near Eastern histories, some of his dates and reigns are, not surprisingly, now known to be wrong. This applies not only to early Egyptian dynasties but even to more recent events such as the short reign incorrectly attributed to Cleomenes (5.48). His indications of chronology are reasonably more precise the closer he comes to the events of the recent past.

Geography

Hecataios (mentioned prominently at 2.143 and 6.137) wrote a *Trip around the Earth*, by which he meant a circumnavigation of the Mediterranean. Herodotus knew some areas better than others—for example, he knew the eastern Mediterranean better than the western—but he would be considered a well-traveled researcher and historian even today (see Romm, *The Edges of the Earth in Ancient Thought*). The Persian Empire and the Athenian were fairly open to civilian travel for merchants, tourists, and others who caused no trouble and brought drachmas along. If we believe Herodotus, he went as far as Babylon in the east, far up the Nile in the south, to the Crimea in the north, and to at least southern Italy in the west.

So-called “Digressions”

Herodotus speaks of additions and insertions in his work—for example, at 4.30, 7.5, 7.171, where the

are usually mistranslated as “digressions.” Therefore, we cannot claim that everything therein equally integral to his *Histories*, but those critics are mistaken who think an account of the two military invasions of mainland Greece by Dareios and Xerxes were his only or principal theme. In fact, most who object to his catholic and inclusive comprehensiveness have failed to appreciate how for him history includes geography, ethnography, anthropology (see Hartog, *The Mirror of Herodotus*; Evans, *Herodotus: Explorer of the Past*; and Gould, *Herodotus*), economics, sociology, and cultural criticism. Since no one had conceived of, or delimited, the field of history before Herodotus, much less defined it (insofar as one can assert that it even now stands defined), Herodotus’ themes and subjects may be said to include whatever Herodotus has provided us. He also alludes briefly to persons, places, and events that he has deliberately omitted, and he consciously suppresses various names and deeds (for example, at 1.14.4, 2.70.1, 4.43.8, 5.72.4, and 9.43.2). Only through presumption or inattentiveness would we assert that he did not control his materials or that he “could not resist a good story.” The text proves repeatedly that he did.

Object of the Histories

Beyond the information in that magisterial and periodic first sentence, among the questions that Herodotus set out to answer are: (1) How have peoples (including the women) of Asia, Africa, and Europe organized themselves, and what have they accomplished and built? (2) How did the marginal Persians from the northeast of the known or “inhabited” world (*oikoumene*) come to rule the barbarian (that is, non-Greek) and much of the Greek world in sixty years? (3) How did the marginal and divided pesky Greeks occupying the northwest corner of the ancient “civilized” world defeat them, after richer, stronger, more populous autocratic national states fell like matchsticks or with a hollow thud? (4) What can we ever know of the always instantly vanishing past?

Herodotus supplements and curtails his reported *logoi* (accounts), to help the reader get situated and to fit them into his larger picture. He has discovered wildly heterogeneous information, collected and collated it, and now he guides the reader through it—sometimes correcting, sometimes asserting a contrarian view or wonderful fact (the “works great and marvelous” emphasized in his first sentence along with the perduring achievements)—without being able to explain all the occurrences adequately or to his own satisfaction. Herodotus recognizes limits to what a historical investigator can prove; rarely is certainty attainable about past particulars, or even about contemporary natural history or fauna, flora, or exotic civilizations. Surviving traces of the past, such as tombs, dedications, and memorials, can preserve testimony “to my time” (*Histories* has more than one hundred examples of this phrase), but they can also mislead, intentionally or innocently.

Writing for his future readers, not only for those “insiders” who already know the stories, Herodotus “unobtrusively explains the background” (see Dewald’s article “‘I didn’t give my own genealogy,’” p. 286). He points out connections that are helpful and make him readable. He is the only Ionic historical author deemed worthy of preservation for later centuries of Greeks, and is thus useful to us still.

Methods of the Histories

Few readers looking for historical “facts” have appreciated the methodological sophistication of Herodotus’ profoundly historical work. Based on an amazing experience and grasp of the

heterogeneous Mediterranean world and its hinterland, and on hundreds, perhaps thousands, interviews with survivors and descendants, Herodotus' Histories gives shape and meaning to a min world war that lasted, off and on, a good twenty-five years and sucked in every city and nation. The educated layman, less concerned with the accuracy of every specific detail, has never failed to find delight and instruction in Herodotus' variegated and serious contribution to countless questions about antiquity. The accuracy of even the accounts that have been impugned turns out to be greater with nearly every new discovery—lately, for example, excavations of the Athos Canal (7.22); see the New York Times, November 13, 2001, p. F5).

Merits

Let us here briefly summarize the merits and defects of the first historian, perhaps the last who followed his demanding but peculiar criteria.

Originality. No one had ever written a rational account of the past based on evidence before Herodotus did so. His architectural conception of building a narrative that combines many stories concerning many nations—a structure that culminates in the dynamic intersection of major historical internal pressures and external forces—is breathtaking. No one has yet written a better study of his own hundred years (approximately 575-475 B.C.) and more. No one probably ever will or could.

Veracity. Herodotus is astute at looking over the monuments and the land, at asking probing questions and at recording what he heard from survivors and descendants. He then intelligently creates a narrative from conflicting evidence and accounts. While his considered opinions sometimes have been improved upon, the “liar school of Herodotus” has not convinced many others. Those detractors attempt to convict him of ingeniously making up his evidence as well as his history out of whole cloth while sitting in comfort, without ever having visited the sites or the informants that he claims to have examined. (Fehling argues that all his sources were invented and serve for bluff and ornamentation; Pritchett, in *The Liar School of Herodotus*, ably refutes him.)

Impartiality. Herodotus clearly thought the Hellenic victory was a good thing for Hellenic civilization. Yet he just as obviously admires societies in which intelligence and energy are rewarded, and in which justice and honest labor are respected. Thus he reports virtues and defects in both the Hellenes and the Persians, as well as in others. He is relatively free of national vanity, although he clearly admired the unexpected Hellenic alliance, the preservation of local independence, and the repulse of the Iranian military machine.

English historian Edward Creasy, author of *The Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World* (1851) allegedly opined that the battle of Marathon was more important for the history of Britain than the battle of Hastings. Except for Herodotus, no account of that day at Marathon would exist. Creasy was claiming that Western Civilization could not be imagined if the Athenians and Plataeans had not taken their unexpected and valiant stand in September of 490 B.C. If Creasy, with centuries of hindsight

thought that this battle was pivotal, Herodotus must be allowed to argue its importance for further Hellenic resistance (6.109, 6.112). The delicious fact that Herodotus has been charged by various authors with philo-Laconism and philo-Athenianism and philo-barbarism suggests his generosity to all these ethnic and political divisions. His admiration for yet other groups is evident on every page. Herodotus credits men and women of all nations for clever contrivances, institutions, inventions, and aphorisms. Although he speaks of barbarians, he does not usually weight that term negatively. Like the once Christian and still Hebrew and Mormon term “gentiles,” “barbarian” indicates for his Hellenic group all those in the category of “other.”

Defects

Herodotus has never lacked honest critics and hostile detractors, the latter sometimes motivated by envious malice. One can criticize his Histories for what he did not learn only after recognizing what he could not, in his situation, learn. Many of the following alleged “failings” seem venial once understood in the context of his and his contemporaries’ limited resources for excavating the human past.

Diplomatic and Military Inexperience. Herodotus was never a politician or a general, so far as we know. He probably never experienced combat even as an infantryman or oarsman. His accounts of negotiations and battles often reflect the interpretations of the “man in the street” or rank-and-file soldier rather than the strategic thinking of infantry and naval commanders, although that planning would not have been very sophisticated. His simplified accounts of the battles of Lade, Marathon, and Salamis suggest this limited perspective. His Victorian translator George Rawlinson, brother of the early Assyriologist, praised his ability to sift and weigh evidence when it was adequate (see Rawlinson’s lengthy introduction to the 1875 edition of his translation, pp. 69-112 of the third edition published in London by John Murray). In “On the Possibility of Reconstructing Marathon and Other Ancient Battles,” Norman Whatley employs the battle of Marathon—chiefly Herodotus’ account, of course—to illustrate the pitfalls we face today when trying to understand the means and ends of ancient hoplite warfare from the available evidence.

Ignorance. Herodotus did not know the Persian, Egyptian, Phoenician, or Accadian languages, or any African or Asiatic language. Nor did he claim to know them. This linguistic ignorance rendered him liable to interpreters’ errors, exaggerations, and desires to please. It is not to be confused with credulity, “an undue love of the marvelous in religion, nature, or the habits of men,” as Rawlinson would have it. Beyond language barriers, Herodotus had no experts or encyclopedias to consult on the administration of the Persian Empire, the extraction of oils and minerals, or the cultivation of cotton. His access to information that we take for granted was very limited, in Greece and more so beyond. His ability to get many things right in so many fields of human activity (politics, economics, anthropology, religion, ecology, geography, etc.) is more astonishing than his demonstrable errors or failures to prosecute further his varied researches.

Gullibility. Lacking access to whichever archives existed, to written sources, and to proven methods

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