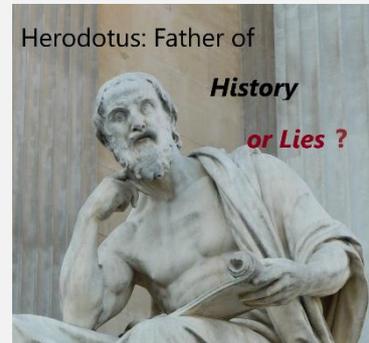


**Past and Future: Background Briefing:**

## Herodotus and The Expansion of The Greek World-View

**Topics:**

- *Herodotus the Man*
- *The Nature of His Investigations*
- *Herodotus and Other 'Investigators'*
- *The Conflict Between Greece and Persia*
- *Herodotus as the Father of History*
- *The Reliability of Herodotus*
- *Herodotus and the Expansion of the Known World*
- *Bibliography and Further Reading*



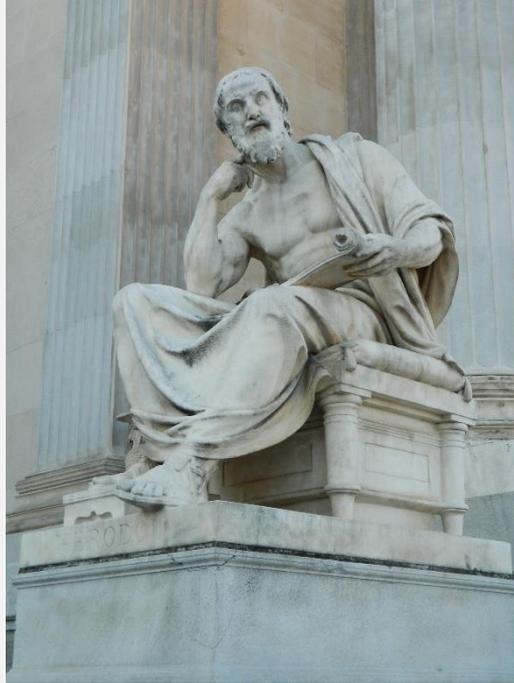
### 1. Herodotus the Man

Most of what we know about Herodotus can be inferred from his book, known to us as *The Histories*. His main theme is the conflict between the Greek and Persian worlds, and the background to that conflict. Herodotus himself did not fight in that conflict, living approximately a generation after the Persian Wars, but he certainly spoke to eye-witnesses for many of the events he records, as well as using a diverse range of poetic and geographical material.

The name Herodotus literally means gift of the goddess Hera. (Burns 1972, p13). He was probably born around 484 BCE, and died some time after 430 BCE, since only some of the events of the following Peloponnesian War are known to him, e.g. he does not mention even indirectly the great Athenian expedition of 415 BCE against Syracuse. He was born in the Ionian town of Halicarnassus. This town, situated towards the south of the Ionian coast of Asia Minor, would have allowed him to hear stories from Caria, Lydia, and the regions further east. It was a Dorian settlement, but used Ionic dialect in its official documents, the language used in Athens (Briggs 1985, p272). In this environment, too, he would have possibly inherited some of the critical thought which had been developed by the Ionian philosophers since the 6th century BCE, and as we shall see, along with myths and humorous stories he used a critical and rational method in trying to assess the validity of some of the traditions he preserves, e.g. in selectively reporting truthful rather than exaggerated sources about the Persian King Cyrus (Herodotus I.96)

A later source, bearing the name of Suidas, dating to the eleventh century CE, describes Herodotus as coming from a prominent family of Halicarnassus and going into exile to the island of Samos because of the tyrant Lygdamis, who had put to death one of Herodotus' relatives. Apparently, Herodotus returned to help expel the tyrant. However, it seems that in the aftermath of this political turmoil he left Halicarnassus again (Burn 1972). The later Christian historian, Eusebius, believes that he gave public readings of parts of his work in Athens during 446-5 BCE., a notion supported by the smoothness and beauty of his Greek prose (Hunter 1982). Herodotus later on became a colonist in the settlement of Thuria in southern Greece, a dominantly Athenian re-settlement of the destroyed city of Sybaris (destroyed by nearby Croton). This would have occurred in 443 BCE (Burns 1972, pp11-14).

Herodotus states that he saw many of the countries he describes with his own eyes: he seems to have travelled the Mediterranean widely. He visited Egypt, Tyre, and then perhaps travelled eastward to visit Babylon, though this has been disputed by modern historians (Ravn & Tovborg-Jensen 1942, p84, p95). If he did not go himself, then he at least received a quite good eye-witness account of the city of Babylon, which includes details of its walls and temples.



*Herodotus, a foundational Greek historian and prose-writer of the 5<sup>th</sup> Century BCE*  
(Photo courtesy of janka00simka0 and Pixabay, used under Pixabay Content License)

Herodotus probably migrated to Athens circa 450 BCE but failed to become a citizen due to a restrictive law of 451 BCE, though his account, as a whole, shows strong ‘sympathies’ towards that city (Briggs 1985, p275). Herodotus seems to have left Athens sometime after 430 BCE, probably to escape the plague that was devastating the city and the onset of the *Peloponnesian War*. Apparently, he died in Thuria, where he was later honoured with a mausoleum in the marketplace, though this monument may have been built at a much later date when his reputation was firmly established (de Selincourt 1962, p14).

## **2. The Nature of His Investigations**

Herodotus’ work is known by the Greek word ‘*historia*’ (ἱστορία), which essentially means researches, or inquiry, though the word later on came to mean ‘story’, or account. Thus, the classical Greek ‘*historia*’ meant ‘a learning by inquiry: knowledge or information obtained by inquiry’ and also ‘a narration of what one has learnt’ (Liddell & Scott 1987, p335). This word, of course, eventually evolved into our concept of ‘history’, and in this sense the modern discipline of history was born directly from the long tradition established by Herodotus (though reborn with new archival and rationalist inputs after the Renaissance). If so, Herodotus is one of the most formative thinkers ever born, since for history as the systematic analysis of past events remains one of the dominant paradigms of modern thought.

The opening lines of the *Histories* reads; -

Herodotus of Halicarnassus, his Researches are here set down to preserve the memory of the past by putting on record the astonishing achievements both of our own and other peoples; and more particularly, to show how they came into conflict. (I.1, R. Warner translation)

This simple statement may seem very ordinary; it is exactly what we would expect an historian to do. This is what is surprising: the first Western historian whose work has come down to us in any detail demonstrates a self-conscious awareness of his role in relation to posterity, i.e. the preservation of an understanding of the past for present and future generations. This suggests that there had been considerable shifts in thinking and awareness in the fifth century BCE from prior epic and poetic approaches to allow this mode of analysis to develop. Notice also that Herodotus has provided himself with three rather distinct tasks; ‘a general concern with the preservation of records of human affairs; the more particular interest in the deeds of Greeks and barbarians; and the aetiological or scientific interest in discovering the cause of conflict’ (Usher 1970, p5). Beyond this, however, Herodotus is also concerned to provide an investigation of the moral claims and values of his key protagonists; the Persian kings Darius and Xerxes are both imbedded in the theme of dangerous and unjust military campaigns which rebound against them (Hunter 1982). He is also happy to include the noteworthy or wonderful, though the deeper sense of this is the wonder of relationships and causation across events, actions, and the decision of the protagonists in his account (Marincola 2006, p23).

Arnaldo Momigliano argues that the works of the two first major Greek historians known to us, Herodotus and Thucydides, are ‘rooted in the intellectual revolution of the fifth century and derive their full significance from it. This is the time in which tragedy, comedy, medicine, philosophy and eloquence were either created or transformed. Even if we did not know that Sophocles was a friend of Herodotus, we would perceive the latter’s connections with the former in moral, religious, and political feelings’ (1978, p6). Eloquence, here, refers to the arts of oratory of public speaking, which were a crucial part of Greek education and the political life of the Greek city-states. However, there are very real differences between history in its method of investigation and expression to these other disciplines, even though it was influenced by their achievements. In particular, the assessment of causes, and the distinction between mere symptoms and underlying deep causes may have been influenced by the body of medical practice and medical tracts which emerged in the 6th and 5th centuries, perhaps especially influenced by Ionian medicine. This trend, however, is stronger in the later works of Thucydides than in Herodotus (Kurke 2001, p129).

Herodotus wrote in ‘simple speech’, that is, prose rather than the poetic forms preferred by Homer and Hesiod (for the linkages between Homer, Herodotus and Thucydides, see Rood 1998). Indeed, up to this time poetry, *poiesis* or ‘making’, was the main medium for memory, narrative and education (Marincola 2006, p13). Dionysus of Halicarnassus (circa 60 BCE-7 CE), a later literary critic who wrote during the age of emperor Augustus, stated that Herodotus had several predecessors and contemporaries in this kind of writing. They wrote accounts of their own and other cities, of Greek and foreign peoples, and published official records as well as legends (Burns 1972, p23). Likewise, the earlier Ionian Greek philosopher Anaximander (circa 610-546 BCE) also wrote many of his ideas in prose, including his treatise *On the Nature of Things* (Kershaw 2022, pp52-53). This suggests that a group of writers were beginning to set down in investigations, even if their focus was more local or specialized. Unfortunately, only limited amounts survives of these earlier writings.

### **3. Herodotus and Other ‘Investigators’**

The only one of these writers quoted regularly by Herodotus was Hecataeus of Miletus. Herodotus respected him as a senior statesman during the Ionian revolt against Persian control (499-494 BCE), but criticizes him as a writer (VI.137). The surviving fragments of Hecataeus, though extremely limited and deriving mostly from Herodotus, suggest that Hecataeus made important contributions in 'genealogy, ethnology, demography and history' (Usher 1970, p2). His study of the different regions of the known world, the *Periegesis*, included the first clear statement of the different divisions of Europe and Asia. Usher argues notes that Hecataeus represents a clear break from earlier poetic traditions: -

Hecataeus employed prose because he was writing in a spirit of scientific enquiry and with the purpose of presenting factual material, not of exercising creative imagination. But it is not in this departure from literary tradition that his main importance lies: he possessed the chief quality which distinguishes the mere story-teller from the true historian - scepticism. He undertakes to tell only what seems to him credible for, as he says, 'the stories of the Greeks are many and ridiculous, as it seems to me'. In practice, the principle turns out to be more impressive than its application, so that on occasion Hecataeus seemed gullible and naive even to his contemporaries . . . However, it is probably not an exaggeration to credit Hecataeus with the first attempt at reconciling mythology with history in his *Genealogies*, and of his being the first writer to observe and record systematically the topography and historical traditions of several cities of the Greek world. (Usher 1970, pp2-3)

Hecataeus seems to have been fulfilling a real interest of Greeks, who by this stage had extensive trade routes throughout the eastern Mediterranean. Likewise, the idea of a regular 'travel-logue' which included Egypt and Phoenicia, may have already begun to form in the Greek mind (Casson 1974). The Athenian poet and statesman Solon apparently had visited Egypt, while legend ascribes visits to an already 'ancient' Egypt by figures as diverse as Odysseus and Plato. Greek interest in Egypt, and especially in Egyptian religion and wisdom, far predates the classical period. Visits by Greeks to Egypt seem to have occurred for at least three reasons during this early period of contact: trade, Greeks acting as mercenaries, and for the purposes of learning from Egyptian 'wisdom'. Several prominent Greeks are said to have visited Egypt, beginning with Menelaus (King of Mycenaean Sparta), who according to Homer's *Odyssey* stayed a considerable time in Egypt and accumulated valuable possessions which he brought back to Greece (IV.81ff & 128ff). Odysseus himself is claimed to have visited Egypt in the company of roving pirates (*Odyssey* XVII.425), though we should not place too much reliance on these literary accounts (Stubblings, 1975, p354). Possible visitors include Hecataeus (likely), Solon (possible), Herodotus (likely) and Plato (improbable) in order to benefit from Egyptian learning, especially from the wisdom of her priests. In later periods we know that Polybius, Strabo, and Juvenal visited or resided in Egypt, though by second century these visits might be better termed 'sight-seeing' (Casson 1974). It is interesting to note that in both the cases of Solon and Plato, though this desire for learning was the main reason cited, the method for financing the trip was through trade (Plutarch *Solon* 2). The point here is that by the time of Herodotus a country such as Egypt was still a distant country, but well within the ambit of Greek traders and more adventurous travellers.

Other possible sources for Herodotus include Charon of Lampsacus, Dionysius of Miletus, Xanthus (who wrote a history of the kingdom of Lydia), and Hellanicus of Lesbos, but we know very little about these writers except what has been preserved in a few fragments, largely in Herodotus' work itself (Burns 1972, pp24-5; Usher 1970, p3). It is therefore impossible to assess them independently, and we are unsure of how dependent Herodotus was on their accounts. The general project of *The Histories* may owe something to the form of geographical accounts and travel-journal developed by Hecataeus, but so far as we can tell none of these earlier works are on the scale or level of sophistication of the *Histories* itself. Herodotus usually only specifically mentions the name of Hecataeus when he chooses to disagree with him (Briggs 1985). Indeed,

the major influence on Herodotus may have remained Homer. Oswyn Murray argues that it was from Homer that he borrowed his epic theme of the war between two cultures, and that ancient writers (e.g. Longinus *On the Sublime*, XIII, 3) regarded Herodotus as the most Homeric of writers (Murray 1973, p463).

#### 4. The Conflict Between Greece and Persia

Herodotus sets out to describe the war between the Greeks and the Persians, which he saw as part of a great conflict between east and west. Starting with a history of Greece and its relations with Lydia and the east in the generation of King Cyrus, who founded Persia's power, he builds his account through 64 years until the great invasion of Greece in 480 BCE (Burns 1972, p16). This certainly was one of the pivotal periods in Greek history, and it laid a foundation for the future development of Greece for the next 200 years. It created the pre-conditions for the later *Peloponnesian War*, and the Persian sacking of Greek temples was the explicit *causis belli* for the invasion of the Persian Empire by Alexander the Great in the late 4th century and perhaps for the destruction of Persepolis (Arrian *Anabasis* III.18.12; Strabo XV.3.6; Diodorus XVI.89.2, XVII.4.9 & XVII.70-72). It is probable that many ancient temples in Athens aside from the Acropolis had been destroyed by the Persians, e.g. temple of Olympian Zeus, of Pythian Apollo, of Earth, and Dionysus in Limnae were at least looted, and probably destroyed (Thucydides II.15), while the wealthy temple of Apollo at Branchidae (Didyma) near Miletus was also plundered (Herodotus VI.19). The theme of the heroic Greeks verses the 'decadent empires' of Asia and the east would be taken up as a narrative-form from the Roman Empire through to the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

A brief over-view of the plan of the *Histories* will help explain the nature of this work.

*Book & Contents* (Adapted from Burns 1972, pp17-19):

I, 1-5: East verses West

I, 6-94: The kingdom of Lydia till the Persian conquest (includes discursus on Greek and Spartan ethnology)

I, 95-216: The Growth of the Power of Persia under King Cyrus, Persian culture and customs, Persian conquests

II: Egyptian geography, anthropology and history

III,1-38: Cambyses' Conquest of Egypt

III, 39-60: Contemporary Greece

III, 61-97: Persian affairs

III, 98-117: Travels to distant lands

III, 120-49: King Darius and the West

IV, 1-143: Description of Scythia

IV, 145-205: North Africa and the Greek colony of Cyrenaica

V, 1-27: Ethnology of the Balkans and the north

V, 28-126: Ionian Revolt and its Repression by Persia

VI, 1-42 Ionian revolt continued

VI, 43-120: Persian advance into Greece until battle of Marathon

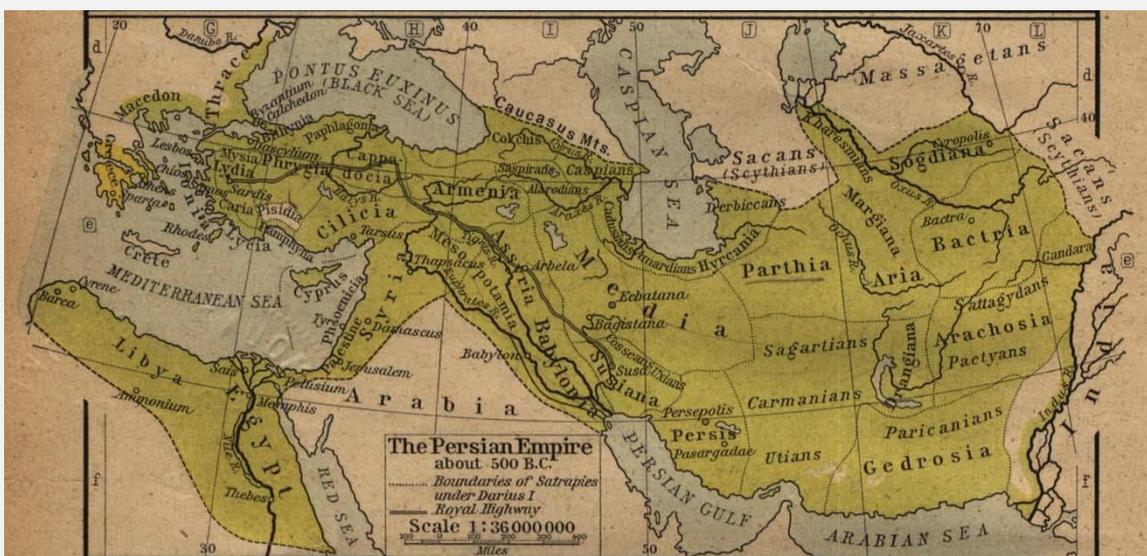
VI, 120-140: Factions and affairs in Athens

VII: The Great Invasion of Greece by Xerxes

VIII: Invasion Continued: Battle of Salamis, withdrawal of Persians.

IX: Invasion continued. Land battles and Battle of Plataea. Continued operations against Persians in Ionia. Concluding moral.

This division into nine books was first made by the scholastic librarians of Alexandria in the Hellenistic period (Briggs 1985, p273), but is logical in showing the main themes. Notice several factors about this structure. Firstly, the *Histories* really is a full account of the Persian War, describing both sides in depth, including social and historical factors. It therefore includes a detailed account of regions of the Persian Empire, including its boundaries. Thus Egypt, Persia, Babylonia, the Balkans, and the Scythians (nomadic groups found on the plains around the Black Sea) are discussed in some detail, as well as accounts of Greek affairs, traditions, and diplomatic relations. It is this rationale that provides a unifying arc for the book, making it much more than a group of disparate sections that were pulled together later on.



*Map of the Persian Empire, circa 500 BCE*

(Map Courtesy of Perry-Castañeda Library at

[https://maps.lib.utexas.edu/maps/historical/shepherd/persian\\_empire.jpg](https://maps.lib.utexas.edu/maps/historical/shepherd/persian_empire.jpg)

This means that Herodotus' narrative includes much more than political history. It provides a detailed analysis of geography (partly based on Hecataeus), a description of the customs and stories of other nations (ethnology), as well as brief histories of these nations. The numerous so-called 'digressions' are part of the overall plan. On occasions, however, these digressions seem little more than the desire to preserve or tell a good story for its own sake. Remembering that Herodotus may have performed parts of his work in public, this was probably an effective way of making his account more popular. On occasion Herodotus notes that he does not believe the note-worthy story he has felt obliged to preserve, and that neither he nor the reader should feel obliged to regard it as true (Usher 1970, p5; Herodotus II.123, VII.152). Historical narrative, it seems, had not yet fully broken away from older story-telling structures, but this remains true to some extent today, where historical accounts often have a narrative structure with flows and climaxes informed by literary rather than factual demands (see White 1973).

Last, it seems that the *Histories* underwent several revisions and may not have been entirely finished in the form we have received. As noted by A. Burns, there is no treatment of Greek affairs from 489-481 BCE: this may indicate that the work was not quite complete at the time of Herodotus' death (1972, p18).

## 5. Herodotus as the Father of History

As indicated above, the origin meaning of the word *historia* had been that of an investigation. The discipline of history as we know it today simply had not existed in Greece before this time. Nor were the religious records and king-lists of Egypt and the Near East anything like what we would call historical analysis, though the royal annals of the later Hittite Empire do come close in the critical recording of information.

Exactly what history is and should be is a debate which has raged from ancient times (see *What is History* by the Roman satirist Lucian) through to major contemporary debates. For some history is basically a kind of social science which deals with past events in a meaningful way (see E.H. Carr, *What is History?*), while for others history is an interpretative art which can never quite achieve a scientific status (see Karl Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism*). Without discussing these positions in detail, we can note that there were there are three significant ways in which Herodotus does something very similar to modern historians: -

- 1) Herodotus preserves a range of evidence, accounts and opinions, even if he is doubtful of some of this information, or in the end disagrees with the received account. In this way, *historia* is not merely a personal viewpoint on past events, but an investigation from which others can profit even if they do not agree with that particular historian's conclusions. His notion of preservation of 'data' shifts Herodotus away from a presenter of mere opinion to a preserver of evidence and viewpoints.
- 2) The historian, even though he looks at a wide range of information, is nonetheless selective in what he includes in his account. This selectivity should not be based so much on personal bias, but as part of an attempt to structure a meaningful narrative which can provide some coherent picture of past events. If the historian in the end is unable to completely explain what has happened, he is still obliged to provide as accurate a description as possible of the relevant events and their causes and inter-relationships.
- 3) The historian is able to critically assess the evidence he marshals by a variety of means: either through the use of logic and common sense, through personal inspection of whatever evidence remains, or by critically comparing different accounts which he has received.

Herodotus at times engages in each of these three critical activities, though his account is still tinged with religious and mythical viewpoints. However, he will sometimes cite a source, such as Hecataeus to explicitly disagree with them, and at other times recounts interesting stories but states that he does not believe them (Briggs 1985).

In brief, Herodotus is quite effective in meeting the first two criteria: his evidence is both extensive and moulded into a large-scale account of the background and the conduct of the Persian War. He also begins to look at this evidence critically: for example, he assesses the idea that Egypt is the gift of the Nile by quoting soundings from ships which show that silt from the Nile extends for many miles out to sea north of the Delta, indicating that most of southern Egypt had

been built up from the layers of silt brought down by the river over aeons, i.e. the Delta really is 'a gift of the Nile' (in Book II). Likewise, he will not accept that there is a sea to the north of Europe because he has not been able to speak to someone who has seen it with his own eyes (although Herodotus in the end was wrong on this point, not knowing of the Arctic Ocean, but his principle of research remains valid). It is this critical assessment of the evidence which allows an advance in the systematic analysis of the past.

Herodotus was also one of the first Greek writers, along with Hecataeus, to effectively build an extended prose narrative. So far as we know he "was the first European historian and remains, in many respects among the greatest; he was also . . . the first European writer to use prose as an artistic medium. The art of Greek prose was Herodotus' invention." (De Selincourt 1962, p26) At the same time his prose was not without poetic phrasing. Thus, he is often viewed as the most Homeric of writers, using a wide range of expression that would made aid his reading aloud of sections of the work (Briggs 1985). His work also sought to bring glory to the notable deeds of Greeks and barbarians, and here he was in part following the praise and honorific poetry that was common from the archaic period onwards (Marincola 2006, pp17-18).

Momigliano states that Herodotus 'seems to have been the first to produce an analytical description of a war, the Persian war. Furthermore, he was probably the first to use ethnographical and constitutional studies in order to explain the war itself and to account for the outcome' (1978, p3). Beyond this, his study represents a major shift away from mythical and poetic narratives as a means of experiencing the past. He attempts to explain events in the light of a wide-ranging study of cultural, political and military affairs, making him something of the 'social historian'. Many of his comments may seem rather naive to us today; but this does not reduce the fundamental break between the type of account provided between Homer and Hesiod on the one hand, and Herodotus and Thucydides on the other. Furthermore, Herodotus tends to build up complex accounts where different events in Egypt, Persia, Asia Minor and Europe all converge to create a great period of crisis. Instead of a narrow view of immediate causes, we have a much stronger picture concerned with 'social facts' and with a 'structural causality' where historical processes rather than a mere chronology are fundamental (Hunter 1982a & 1982b). Indeed, the work as a whole can be seen as a long chain of causal links that bind the work as a whole into a powerful narrative:

In Herodotus there is a direct line drawn from the opening figure of Croesus, the first man to conquer Greeks, to the final battle of Mycale, the last historical incident in Herodotus' work: for Croesus eventually yielded his power to Cyrus, and from then on the Greeks' destiny became entwined with that of the Persian empire. Moreover, Herodotus emphasised the line of causation by cutting off for the most part what might be called 'mythical' time and basing himself mainly on events for which there are human sources and evidence. (Marincola 2006, pp16-17)

History and the writing of history (historiography) are ways of capturing the past and present for the future, and alternatively of making the present more meaningful by relating it to the past. It is both a powerful and dangerous tool - used properly, it empowers us with a deeper perspective of the relationships in our world, misused, it can become a kind of trap from which holds us in an invented and biased past. It is for this reason, perhaps, that Herodotus was sometimes harshly attacked as the 'father of lies' (see further below).

## **6. The Reliability of Herodotus**

The reliability of the information contained in Herodotus has often been strongly doubted, in both ancient and modern times. Rather than being called the father of history, he has sometimes been

called the 'father of lies'. Plutarch, the biographer of the 1st century CE, wrote an essay *On the Malice of Herodotus*, which strongly criticized him. A.R. Burns also reminds us that Plutarch was a Boeotian, i.e. he came from the region of Thebes, and Herodotus had castigated Thebes in his account because they had Medized, i.e. gone over to the Persian side during the war (1972, p15). Even though Thebes had little choice due to the presence of overwhelming Persian forces in northern Greece and the decision of the Spartans to make their main defensive land position at the Isthmus of Corinth, this became a serious charge against them during later periods.

Thus Plutarch, though recognising Herodotus' skill as a writer, argued that: -

The style, O Alexander, of Herodotus, as being simple, free, and easily suiting itself to its subject, has deceived many; but more, a persuasion of his dispositions being equally sincere. For it is not only (as Plato says) an extreme injustice, to make a show of being just when one is not so; but it is also the highest malignity, to pretend to simplicity and mildness and be in the meantime really most malicious. Now since he principally exerts his malice against the Boeotians and Corinthians, though without sparing any other, I think myself obliged to defend our ancestors and the truth against this part of his writings, since those who would detect all his other lies and fictions would have need of many books. (Plutarch *The Malice of Herodotus* I)

When Herodotus did not actually travel to a foreign country that he discussed, we might ask how he got his information. He certainly does not know any language other than Greek in any depth - his few attempts in giving foreign derivations of names are disastrous. Even local languages of Asia Minor were not known to him:

A glance at the range of remarks made by Herodotus on other foreign languages shows, however, that there is nothing here to suggest a special knowledge or even a special interest in Carian. Nor can we merely take for granted from Herodotus' Carian background that he was able to understand the Carian language.

In the case of other languages, he shows himself ignorant by his interest. Famously he asserts that all Persian names end in the letter sigma, so revealing that he knew all his Persian through its Greek forms (1.139) - and also ignoring his own evidence of the names of Persian women such as Atossa or Phaedyme. . . . Herodotus seems to have mistaken all pictographic scripts for Egyptian, so that the discovery of various Hittite and other near-Eastern monuments convinced him that he had found traces of the campaign of Sesostris, a semi-mythical Egyptian king, in Asia Minor, Phoenicia, and even Thrace. He also claims to have seen, and to have been able easily to read, examples of 'Cadmeian letters' inscribed in the temple of Apollo Ismenias in Thebes (5.59-61); these inscriptions, in immaculate Greek verse, he believed to have been inscribed by contemporaries of Oedipus and his father Laius. (Harrison 1998)

For Egypt, he seems to have relied upon Egyptian informers, sometimes priests, and specifically mentions translators as a caste (Briggs 1985), perhaps meaning specialist scribes. We can only assume that bilingual speakers and translators were available in some of these places, though some may have used crude subsets of languages for the purposes of trade (early pidgin or creole forms). Certainly, Greek trade centres, e.g. the city of Naukratis in the Nile Delta, and the cities of Phoenicia and Syria would have had some Greek speakers due to the extensive trade that had gone on since the 8th and 7th centuries BCE, or Greek traders might have picked up enough of local tongues to maintain discourse. This local knowledge of Greek or other languages may have been at the level of other trade languages; i.e. a kind of pidgin polyglot. When used to translate historical and cultural information many misinterpretations, and much misinformation, would also have been passed on. It seems unlikely that Herodotus would have had access to the highly trained interpreters and scribes that served the Egypt or Phoenician royal courts. Multilingual scribes in major temples may also have been used to sustain trade in specialised goods needed for temple rituals, but it is unlikely that Herodotus had access to such informants.

On the other hand, Herodotus is sometimes surprisingly accurate. Thus, he correctly records six of the seven names of the Persian conspirators against the Magian usurper, King Gaumata in 522 BCE (Olmstead 1978, p107-8; Burns 1972, p22). Likewise, he accurately reports that the Caspian is an inland sea, even though later geographers argued that it was open to the ocean to the north. Even though his history of Egypt and his account of their religion is full of errors and rather fragmentary, it is the sort of thing a tourist to Egypt might have picked up on a brief trip, especially since he was unable to speak or read Egyptian, and in local Egyptian eyes he would have been of too low a status to be received officially. Nonetheless, his description of Egyptian embalming for the period is roughly accurate (II, 86). Likewise, he has a quite reasonable understanding of certain aspects of Greek religion associated with Osiris and the funerary cult (Avdijev 1977).

We must also remember that Herodotus also preserves numerous interesting stories, even ones which he explicitly states that he does not believe. He states that; -

My business is to record what people say, but I am by no means bound to believe it - and that may be taken to apply to this book as a whole. (VII.152).

We should avoid using these stories to judge Herodotus - their very preservation gives us much insight into the mentality and attitudes of the time. Furthermore, some of his unlikely stories have turned out to be verified by modern archaeological investigations, e.g. that the Scythians embalmed their dead in honey, and that Nile flood is caused in part by melting snows in the mountains far to the south of Egypt (preserved but disclaimed in Book II.22). However, for Herodotus stories are either all correct, or all wrong, and this does mean he is sometimes uncritical in his use of literary and poetic sources (Burns 1972, p25).

A more difficult question is to what extent was Herodotus subtly biased by his own viewpoints in the account he has provided. Certainly, he is pro-Athenian, a city where he had lived for some years and knew well its intellectual life, as well as being a friend of Sophocles (Griffin 2006, p46). Herodotus frankly believes that it was the Athenian fleet that really turned back the Persian invasion of Xerxes, rather than the land power of Sparta, or the naval forces provided by maritime powers such as Corinth. But his position is still respectable historically. Corinthian and other Greek navies might not have fought at the island of Salamis if it had not been for the determination of the Athenian leaders to break the enemy at this point. Furthermore, Herodotus does not accept the Athenian version that the Corinthians broke and fled during this battle, since he records both versions (VIII.94). He is much more scathing about the Aeginetan involvement in the land battle of Plataea, claiming that their burial cenotaphs were a sham, since they had no casualties (IX.83). However, the Athenians had long had disputes with the island of Aegina and were likely to discount their efforts. Furthermore, a wider reading of the entire work suggests it contains a critique of the hubris of empire, and therefore is an implicit caution to the Athenian expansion of their own naval empire (Dewald & Marincola 2006, p8).

One area where Herodotus and most ancient historians are notoriously inaccurate is in their assessment of numbers; whether of soldiers, money, or the populations of cities. Herodotus' assessment of 2.5 million in the Persian army is no doubt inflated. However, though the assessments of modern historians of a force closer to 300,000 (de Selincourt 1962, p41) may be more correct, it is based on reasonable estimates derived in part from a circumstantial reading of Herodotus rather than hard evidence.

There is one more aspect of Herodotus that might worry a modern reader. There are numerous stories of precognition concerning the future, certainly via the use of oracles, especially from the oracle of Apollo at Delphi. Herodotus quotes these oracles quite often, e.g. the oracle saying that the Athenians should stand fast behind their wooden walls, which could either mean the wooden walls surrounding the temples on the Acropolis, or the wooden walls of their fleet. The modern historian might feel that such tales cannot be part of a serious analysis - but there is no doubt that the Greeks took them very seriously. For the oracles tell the future as decided by fate, *moira*, a dealer out of portions according to necessity (de Selincourt 1962, p57) which even the gods could not change (and Zeus will not change). Here we see Herodotus responding to religious dimension in history that we can only regard as a kind of objectified morality. Yet certain accounts in the book retain the atmosphere of a religious world-view which, though alien to us, makes a strong narrative. One of the most effective is when the Persian army marches into holy Delphi and thunderbolts break large rocks off the surrounding mountains which fall upon the invaders (Herodotus VIII.36). Nonetheless, taking a leaf out of Herodotus' own methodology, we should use such stories as evidence of the attitudes of the time, rather than dismissing them out of hand.

We should also note that when Herodotus reports speeches, these are unlikely to be verbatim and at times may be little more than educated speculation as to what should have been said. Likewise, Herodotus often reports what a people or group said or think as a collective: these are likely to be conjectural, and perhaps part of large structured assessments reacting to popular or contemporary opinions, or at times reporting fabulous accounts or views that Herodotus does not agree with (see Fowler 2006, p37). It is also possible that there was some influence on the structure of Herodotus' arguments from the sophists, who had a strong influence on Athenian political thought and oratory in this period (Thomas 2006, pp67-68). Like all sources, Herodotus needs to be read critically.

## **7. Herodotus and the Expansion of the Known World**

The last crucial innovation of Herodotus was that he greatly expanded the world to which the Greek mind had access. It is true that travellers such as Solon had gone to Egypt, that traders now roved the shores of the entire Mediterranean and Black Seas, and that Hecataeus' travel accounts may have been a model for the work of Herodotus. However, Herodotus' account penetrates more deeply into several hinterlands; up the Nile beyond Egypt, across Asia Minor to Babylon and the Persian homelands, northwards into the Scythian lands surrounding the Caspian and the Black Seas, as well as the northern Balkans. This geography was matched with a dawning knowledge of foreign peoples, customs and histories.

Aubrey de Selincourt (1962) argues that the Greeks were never really interested in the barbarians around them. It is true that the Hellenes always regarded the 'barbarian' as inferior, except perhaps the Egyptians in the area of religious wisdom. But the Greeks were a curious people, and after the huge cataclysm of the Persian war, this curiosity became something of a survival trait. Through their knowledge of the Persian Empire and its limitations, they were able to avoid repeated invasions and force the Persian sphere of influence eastwards away from the coast of Asia Minor. Thereafter, the Persian kingdom became an external 'spoiler' and intervener in Hellenic politics, e.g. by providing funds and some naval support to Sparta in the following Peloponnesian War, but was never able to again dominate Greek affairs. In this, Herodotus was much more than an entertainer or story-teller. He provided a real education and a political service to the Greeks of his own generation. It was also this opening up to foreign accounts and actions, of course, which meant they that could no longer remain totally content with traditional Greek

views of affairs. By providing a range of foreign accounts and histories, Herodotus allowed a comparative, and therefore an implicitly critical approach, to the world around them.

This opening up of horizons can be shown by the geographical extent of Herodotus' investigations, as well as the diversity of his interests:

His world was not 'the little frog pond' of the Mediterranean, as Socrates once described it, but reached out in the south to Ethiopia and beyond, in the east to India, in the north to what we now call Russia, and in the west to the Pillars of Hercules – the Straits of Gibraltar and beyond. He devoted several pages to the river Nile and the problems of its source, and without knowing about the equator noted how travelers round Africa had found themselves returning with the sun on their wrong side. (Briggs 1985, pp274-275).

Unfortunately, inter-Greek rivalries were soon to override what should have been learnt from the Persian Wars: that only a Hellas in which the different city-states co-operated without being dominated by each other, could any of them remain free. It was their relative ignorance or indifference to the importance of the minor kingdom of Macedonia, and the seemingly distant Roman republic, which were to spell their downfall of the Greek city-states into political subservience from the late 4th century onwards.

Herodotus' achievement has been summarized by Aubrey de Selincourt:

He was able (surely the first quality of a good historian) to see his subject as part of a larger process and to be constantly aware of the threads which linked his country with the vast and mysterious lands of Egypt and Asia. He was able to keep before his reader the sense that Greece, the centre of his interest, was still only one country in an immense and diverse world which it was yet to dominate by virtue of certain qualities which that world lacked, above all by that passion for independence and self-determination which was both her glory and her bane; to be aware of the past, not only the immediate but the most remote, as a living element in the present; and to find - unlike, in this, most historians writing today - a continuing moral pattern in the vicissitudes of human fortune the world over. (1962, p23)

In this sense Herodotus' writing is a universal history (a term used by de Selincourt without full explanation, 1962, p37); though that term is usually only applied to later and less original writers such as Diodorus of Sicily. The tapestry of the confrontation between Europe and Asia is still one which haunts European thought, leading to both comparative explorations but also stereotyping and misinformed orientalism (see Said 1978). It is a somewhat mythologized pattern, reaching back into the types of confrontation portrayed by Homer's accounts of the Trojan War, which Herodotus knew very well. But this confrontation was not merely a war 'by land and by sea', and sometimes to 'win' was not enough. The Greeks in a very real sense won the Persian War, but they also won a sharper definition of themselves as a relatively free and vigorous people (Usher 1972, pp8-10; see further Balcer 1983) who should be able to maintain that freedom against all and any other peoples. This viewpoint, of course, has not been forgotten by the modern Greeks.

## **8. Bibliography and Further Reading**

### ***Ancient***

DIODORUS OF SICILY *Library of History*, 12 vols., trans. by C.H. Oldfather *et al.*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1933-1967

EUSEBIUS *The History of the Church*, rev. ed., trans. G.A. Williamson, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1989

- HERODOTUS, *The Histories*, trans. by Aubrey de Selincourt, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1972
- HERODOTUS *Histories*, trans. by A. Godley, London, Heinemann, 1960
- PLUTARCH *Essays and Miscellanies*, [eBooks@Adelaide](http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/p/plutarch/essays/complete.html), Rendered into HTML by Steve Thomas, 2004  
[<http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/p/plutarch/essays/complete.html>]
- PLUTARCH *The Rise and Fall of Athens: Nine Greek Lives*, trans. Ian Scott-Kilvert, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1960
- STRABO *The Geography of Strabo*, 8 vols., trans. by Jones, Horace Leonard, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1964
- THUCYDIDES *The Peloponnesian War*, trans. R. Warner, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1972

## Modern

- AFRICA, T.W. "Herodotus and Diodorus on Egypt", *JNES*, 22, 1963, p254-258
- AVDIJEV, V.I. "Egyptian Traditions in Herodotus", *Revue d'Histoire Ancienne*, 139, 1977, pp184-189 (see English abstract of Russian article)
- BOEDEKER, Deborah "Hero Cult and Politics in Herodotus: The Bones of Orestes", in DOUGHERTY, Carol & KURKE, Leslie (eds.) *Cultural Poetics in Archaic Greece: Cult, Performance, Politics*, Cambridge, CUP, 1993, pp164-177
- BROWN, T.S. "The Greek Exiles: Herodotus' Contemporaries", *Ancient World*, 17, 1988, pp17-28
- BROWN, T.S. "Herodotus' Portrait of Cambyses", *Historia*, 31, 1982, pp387-403
- BROWN, T.S. "Herodotus Speculates About Egypt", *AJP*, 86, 1965, pp60-75
- BURNS, A.R. "Introduction" in Herodotus *The Histories*, trans. by Aubrey de Selincourt, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1972, pp7-40
- BALCER, J.M. "The Greeks and the Persians: The Process of Acculturation", *Historia*, 32, 1983, pp257-67
- BALCER, J.M. *Herodotus and Bisitun: Problems in Ancient Persian Historiography*, Stuttgart, Franz Steiner Verlag Wiesbaden GmbH, 1987
- BRIGGS, Asa "Herodotus", in CANNING, John (ed.) *One Hundred Great Lives of Antiquity*, London, Guild Publishing, 1985, pp271-277
- BURN, A.R. "Introduction", to Herodotus, *The Histories*, trans. by Aubrey de Selincourt, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1972
- CANNING, John (ed.) *One Hundred Great Lives of Antiquity*, London, Guild Publishing, 1985
- CARR, E.H. *What is History*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1983
- CASSON, Lionel *Travel in the Ancient World*, London, Allen & Unwin, 1974
- de SELINCOURT, Aubrey *The World of Herodotus*, Boston, Little, Brown and Co., 1962
- DEWALD, Carolyn & MARINCOLA, John (eds) *The Cambridge Companion to Herodotus*, Cambridge: CUP, 2006
- DREWS, Robert *The Greek Accounts of Eastern History*, Washington, Center for Hellenic Studies, 1973
- EASTERLING, P.E. & KNOX, B.M. (ed.) *The Cambridge History of Classical Literature: I, Greek Literature*, Cambridge, CUP, 1988
- FERGUSON, R. James "Kinglists and Archives, Epics and Propaganda: Near Eastern Historiography (A Background Briefing)", *Journey to the West: Essays in History, Politics and Culture*, 2008 [<http://www.international-relations.com/History/Near-East-Archives.htm>]
- FORNARA, Charles W. *The Nature of History in Ancient Greece and Rome*, Berkeley, Uni. of California Press, 1988
- FOWLER, Robert "Herodotus and his Prose Predecessors:", in DEWALD, Carolyn & MARINCOLA, John (eds) *The Cambridge Companion to Herodotus*, Cambridge: CUP, 2006, pp29-45
- FRANKFORT, H. et al. *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man: An Essay on Speculative Thought in the Ancient Near East*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1977
- GRANT, Michael *Greek and Latin Authors: 800 B.C. - A.D. 1000*, N.Y., H.W. Wilson, 1980
- GRIFFIN, Jasper "Herodotus and Tragedy", in DEWALD, Carolyn & MARINCOLA, John (eds) *The Cambridge Companion to Herodotus*, Cambridge: CUP, 2006, pp46-59
- GRIFFITHS, J.G. "The Order of the Gods in Greece and Egypt (according to Herodotus)", *JHS*, 75, 1955, pp21-23
- HARRISON, Thomas "Herodotus' Conception of Foreign Languages", *Histos*, 2, 1998  
[<http://www.dur.ac.uk/Classics/histos/1998/harrison.html>]
- HOW, W. & WELLS, J. A. *Commentary on Herodotus with Introduction and Appendixes*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1912
- HUNTER, Virginia "Greek History Writing: A View from the Twentieth Century", Macquarie University, MAHA audiotape, 1982a
- HUNTER, Virginia *Past and Process in Herodotus and Thucydides*, Princeton, Princeton Uni. Press, 1982b
- KERSHAW, Stephen P. *Three Epic Battles That Save Democracy: Marathon, Thermopylae and Salamis*, London: Robinson, 2022

- KURKE, Leslie "Charting the Poles of History: Herodotus and Thucydides", in Taplin, Oliver (ed.) *Literature in the Greek World*, Oxford, OUP, 2001, pp115-137
- LIDDELL, Henry George & SCOTT, Robert A *Lexicon Abridged from Liddell and Scott's Greek English Lexicon*, revised by Jones, Henry & McKenzie, Roderick, Oxford, Clarendon, 1987
- LIDDELL, Henry George & SCOTT, Robert A *Greek-English Lexicon, With a Revised Supplement*, revised by Jones, Henry & McKenzie, Roderick, Oxford, Clarendon, 1996
- LLOYD, Alan B. "Herodotus' Account of Pharaonic History", *Historia*, 37, 1988, pp22-53
- LLOYD, A.B. *Herodotus Book II, Commentary 1-98*, Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1976
- MARINCOLA, John "Herodotus and the Poetry of the Past", in DEWALD, Carolyn & MARINCOLA, John (eds) *The Cambridge Companion to Herodotus*, Cambridge: CUP, 2006, pp13-28
- MARWICK, Arthur *The Nature of History*, 3rd ed., Chicago, Lyceum Books, 1989
- MOMIGLIANO, Arnaldo "Greek Historiography", *History and Theory*, 17, 1978, pp1-28
- MOMIGLIANO, Arnaldo *Studies in Historiography*, N.Y., Garland Pub., 1985
- MURRAY, Oswyn "The Ionian Revolt", *Cambridge Ancient History*, 2nd ed., Cambridge, CUP, 1973, Vol IV, Chpt 8, pp461-490
- MYRES, John L. *Herodotus: Father of History*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1968
- OLMSTEAD, A.T. *History of the Persian Empire*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1978
- PEARSON, Lionel "Hecataeus of Miletus" in *Early Ionian Historians*, Westport, Greenwood Press, 1975, pp25-108
- PEARSON, Lionel *Early Ionian Historians*, Westport, Greenwood Press, 1975
- POPPER, K.R. *The Poverty of Historicism*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972
- RAVN, Otto Emil & TOVBORG-JENSEN, *Margaret Herodotus' Description of Babylon*, translated by Margaret Tovborg-Jensen, Copenhagen, Nyt nordisk forlag, 1942
- ROOD, Tim "Thucydides and his Predecessors", *Histos*, 2, 1998  
[<http://www.dur.ac.uk/Classics/histos/1998/rood.html>]
- SAID, Edward W. *Orientalism*, New York, Vintage Books, 1978
- STE CROIX, G.E.M. de "Herodotus", *Greece and Rome*, 24, 1977, pp130-148
- STUBBINGS, Frank H. "The Recession of Mycenaean Civilization", *Cambridge Ancient History*, 3rd rev. ed., Cambridge, CUP, 1975, Vol II, Part 2, Chpt 27, pp338-358
- THOMAS, Rosalind "The Intellectual Milieu of Herodotus", in DEWALD, Carolyn & MARINCOLA, John (eds) *The Cambridge Companion to Herodotus*, Cambridge: CUP, 2006, pp60-75
- USHER, Stephen *The Historians of Greece and Rome*, Bristol, Bristol Classic Press, 1970
- WATERS, K.H. *Herodotus the Historian: His Problems, Methods and Originality*, Norman, Uni. of Oklahoma Press, 1985
- WHITE, Hayden *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1973

## Media and AV Materials

Damen, Mark L. *Herodotus and the Persian Wars*, You Tube Lecture from Professor of History and Classics, Utah State University, n.d. [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2PSMQGCwMxo&t=245s>]

Centre Place *The Invention of History: Herodotus and Thucydides*, You Tube Lecture, n.d. [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ck-pjyurhZ8&t=30s>]

Copyright © 2023 Dr R. James Ferguson  
NB: No AI tools were used in the research or writing of this backgrounder