

Herodotus' Charming Masterpiece

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Herodotus of Halicarnassus once decided that he wanted to write a book. It wasn't a novel or an epic poem, nor was it a guide to farming or astrology. Instead it was an account of all the events that had happened within his memory and the collective memories of those around him, for he felt that these stories were worthy of remembrance. He therefore undertook this great task by talking with his neighbors, doing research, recording folk-tales, reasoning out a compelling narrative and explaining the motives behind all the great and horrible things that had shaped his society. Herodotus was a Greek and his "Greekness" permeates his work, but he tackled such a wide spectrum of peoples, places and times that this feat alone is worthy of awe.

Herodotus the Investigator

Oral Tradition

As an investigator, Herodotus draws from a number of sources and utilizes many different methods to come up with his narrative. His primary way of obtaining information was to rely on widely accepted oral tradition. He visited various different peoples in order to construct his history, and often recounts events simply by saying, "it is said, they say, the Persians say" and so forth.¹

When describing a temple of Aphrodite, he reveals this method by saying, "As I learnt by inquiry, this sanctuary is the oldest of all the sanctuaries of heavenly

¹ VII.212

Aphrodite.”² He will also often prefix certain claims he makes by saying things like, “As far as I have been able to gather from my inquiries...”³ or he will attribute his claims to a particular race; “I did not see it myself, but I am repeating what the Chaldeans say.”⁴

When stories conflict, Herodotus evaluates them and is often not afraid to give his opinion as to which story is more credible. When telling us the story of Cyrus and how he came to power, he chooses to believe the Persian account. “My version will be based on what certain Persians say, those who seek to tell the truth rather than exalt Cyrus’ achievements. But I know of three other versions of the Cyrus story.”⁵

Multiple Versions

He tries on numerous occasions to give us multiple accounts of particular stories. For instance, in the first book he sets out to explain the original causes of strife between the Persians and the Greeks. He admits that there are conflicting accounts, and then gives us the Persian and then the Phoenician. “I am not going to come down in favor of this or that account of events,” he says, but then he offers “to his certain knowledge” an explanation as to who first took criminal action against the Greeks.⁶ He does not explain to us, however, by what means he has gained that certain knowledge, and we are left with only his word that it is true.

Credibility of the Tale

² I.105

³ I.171

⁴ I.183

⁵ I.95

⁶ I.1-5

Although he relies heavily on his sources, he is not incapable of considering the plausibility of what he hears and often goes out of his way to tell us whether he thinks the story is likely or not.⁷ He gives us an account of Cyrus' death that he finds to be the most credible, despite having numerous others to choose from.⁸ When telling a story about a cold land that is so infested with bees that no humans can live there, he says, "Personally, I find this story to be implausible, because bees appear to be intolerant of the cold."⁹

Sometimes Herodotus simply does not offer us any explanation for certain events, due to lack of evidence.¹⁰ When he really doesn't know something, he is hesitant to make any claim as to its truthfulness. For instance, when trying to understand how the Caunians came up with their language, he says, "However, their language has come to approximate that spoken by the Carians (or the Carian language has come to approximate that spoken by the Caunians; I would not like to say for certain which alternative is correct),..."¹¹ This demonstrates that he, at least, is wholly convinced as to the veracity of much of what he hears from the people he questions, and therefore puts it in his book so that we might know the truth. It seems that he is very concerned with the truthfulness of his account, for he goes out of his way to let us know when he is not quite sure whether what he is telling us is true or not.

Herodotus the Guesser

That said, sometimes he does make educated guesses without having any way of backing them up, and makes unarguable claims without offering any evidence. For

⁷ I.182

⁸ I.214

⁹ V.10

¹⁰ I.49; VIII.133

¹¹ I.172

instance, he concludes that the Pelasgians originally spoke a non-Greek language based on the language they were speaking during his own time.¹² In another instance, he comments on a particular battle between Cyrus and the Massagetae, saying “I consider this to be the fiercest battle between non-Greeks there has ever been, and in fact I have information that this was actually the case.”¹³ He leaves it at that, however, and does not give us this information. Similarly, when he gives us a detailed account of strange Persian customs, he says, “I can mention these Persian customs with confidence because I know about them...” and yet he doesn't tell us how he knows about them, whether he learnt of them in a manner other than relying on oral tradition or whether they are simply Greek rumors he carried with him.

Herodotus genuinely attempts to present to us a history that is true, and uses a number of different methods for obtaining and defending these truths. He tries to be thorough, giving us very detailed information to the best of his ability, and he often dissects the arguments and explanations of other races, giving us his own opinion as to their plausibility. He is, however, not above making mistakes and often leaves us asking other questions he was not able—or willing—to delve into.

Herodotus the Biased Narrator

Herodotus was a Greek and certainly had a Greek bias. This bias comes out here and there during his narrative. Being a Greek, he refers to everyone else simply as non-

¹² I.75

¹³ I.214

Greeks,¹⁴ which might be biased but it also makes sense; after all, he was writing in Greek, to Greeks. He sometimes panders to his Greek audience, probably unintentionally, often depicting them in a better light than all other races.

This bias comes out in little quips here and there that do not immediately stand out. For instance, Herodotus presents Xerxes as arrogant. Upon hearing that the Greeks were ready to kill or be killed to defend themselves, he laughed. He sent for a man in his expedition who knew the Greeks well—and who also spoke glowingly about their bravery, coincidentally—and asked him what they were up to, and once the man told him they were preparing for war he, in his arrogance, did not believe the man.¹⁵

Herodotus often points out the inherent “betterness” of Greeks, whether in battle or otherwise. When the Spartans defeated the Persians in a fight, Herodotus comments: “They [the Spartans] made it plain to everyone, however, and above all to the king [of Persia] himself, that although he had plenty of troops, he did not have many men,”¹⁶ the pun, of course, being that only the Spartan soldiers were *real* men. It wasn't just the Spartans that he glorified either: “...Greeks had long been distinguished from non-Greeks by being more clever and less gullible...” he says, when trying to understand how the Greeks could have fallen for a simple trick that was played on them.

He recounts, word for word, a number of lengthy speeches throughout the narrative. Unless he was personally there to have heard them, which he wasn't, it is highly unlikely that he could have regurgitated them so precisely, and even if he had been there it would have been well-nigh impossible. It is likely that Herodotus invented the speeches his characters gave in order to suit the situation, add back-story and explain

¹⁴ I.0 - Introduction

¹⁵ VII.209

¹⁶ VII.212

causation. Thus we might consider it to be Herodotus speaking through his characters when they say things like "...because, as you know, these foreigners [non-Greeks] are completely unreliable and dishonest,"¹⁷ which is surely his pro-Greek bias coming out again.

His inherent Greek bias also stands out whenever he talks about the gods of other people. When Caesar visited the Gauls, he saw their myriad of gods and named them with the names of his Roman gods, based on their similarity. It was his Roman bias that assumed his gods were the real gods, and all other gods were simply his Roman gods in different guises.¹⁸ Herodotus does the same thing. "Aphrodite is called Mylitta by the Assyrians, Alilat by the Arabians, and Mitra by the Persians,"¹⁹ he says. Maybe this is true, but it is also possible that these are just different gods of different peoples that resemble the Greek's own gods, but Herodotus, who believes in the existence of his own Greek gods, cannot see that.

Herodotus and his Search for Causation

Reason

Herodotus is not satisfied with simply telling us that tyrant "A" attacked nation "B" and that many people died. Instead, he is compelled to present us with reasons for why events occurred and the motives behind the characters who spurred these events. Herodotus explains these causations using his own reason, extravagant tales or rumors and the divine omniscience of the gods and oracles.

¹⁷ VIII.142

¹⁸ Caesar, *The Gallic War*. VI.16-17

¹⁹ I.131

Mardonius of Persia, after being influenced by the words of an oracle, desired for Athens to be his ally. Mardonius chose his subject Alexander to ask Athens for friendship. Herodotus gives us two reasons for this choice: 1) Alexander had family ties with Persia; 2) Alexander was Athens's official diplomatic representative and benefactor of the city. Herodotus then gives us the reasoning behind Mardonius' desire to befriend Athens: 1) Mardonius had apparently heard that the Athenians were populous and a warlike race; 2) The previous defeat of the Persians at sea was due mainly to them; 3) He already had a considerable advantage on land and the Athenians would help him master the sea. Herodotus surely had no idea what was going through Mardonius' mind, but he offers these explanations as being the most likely reasons behind his actions, because he felt like his story needed an explained causation.²⁰

He sometimes goes against commonly accepted accounts in order to present us with an alternative version that sounds more plausible. The account of Croesus of Lydia trying to cross the river Halys is a good example: "When Croesus reached the Halys he next used existing bridges to get his army across. At least, that is what I think, but the usual account of the Greeks is that Thales of Miletus got the army across." Here Herodotus purposefully goes against accepted tradition in order for the story to sound more reasonable. He explains the debate over how the river was crossed by recounting the tale that Thales diverted the river in order to get them across, saying, "There are those who go so far as to claim that the original riverbed completely dried up, but I find this implausible, because if it were true, how would they have crossed the river on their way back?"

²⁰ VIII.136

Folk-Tales

Herodotus is fond of using flamboyant tales to explain why things happened. When describing how the Mermnadae—the clan of Lydians whom Croesus was descended from—first took power away from a rival clan called the Heraclidae, Herodotus gives us a curious story. The king thought his wife was the most beautiful woman in the world, and he wanted to prove it to his favorite personal guard by showing her to him naked. After this was done his wife discovered it, and so she had the personal guard kill her husband and seize the kingship for himself. This is unlikely because if, as Herodotus himself says, “...in Lydia—in fact, more or less throughout the non-Greek world—it is a source of great shame even for a *man* to be seen naked,” the king would have never asked such a thing of his guard.²¹

In another story, Herodotus explains Croesus' reasons for invading Cappadocia, including his desire for more territory, the faith he placed in the oracle and “...his wish to punish Cyrus for what had happened to Astyages [his brother-in-law]”. He then recounts, in a wild tale, exactly how Astyages became his brother-in-law: the Scythians chopped up one of the Lydian's young boys and served him to them as a meal. The Lydians then waged war against the Scythians for five years, but then “day became night” and this so startled both sides that they made peace and intermarried.²² In this gruesome tale we find reference to an eclipse, which could come in handy when dating this event, and though it's possible the Lydians could have eaten their own children, is also possible that this story was invented to explain that which had not been explained.

²¹ I.8-12

²² I.73-74

The Gods and the Miraculous

Herodotus will sometimes throw in the miraculous or impossible story as if it were a logical, well known and completely feasible truth. For example, he refers rather off-handedly to a well known "historical" event where Meles, the past king of Sardis, had a concubine who gave birth to a lion.²³

Similarly, he frequently uses the gods as the ultimate causation for certain events. Sometimes he uses them to explain odd phenomena. Hermaphroditism exists, according to Herodotus, because some Scythians plundered a temple dedicated to Aphrodite, and she therefore struck some of their people with the curse of hermaphroditism.²⁴

An over-arching theme of the gods and oracles often architects the very history he is presenting. This is exemplified in the story of the Lydian Croesus and how he was ultimately conquered by Cyrus. Fate and the gods are the backbone of the story: Croesus was defeated because a curse had been placed upon his ancestor Astyages, his father's, father's, father, who was the very honor guard who killed his king, taking over control of the kingdom. Thus Croesus' fate was placed into existence long before Croesus was even born.²⁵

And yet he was not completely forsaken by the gods, for, after being placed upon a funeral pyre to be burnt up, he was saved from the flames when he called upon Apollo for aid, and the sky opened up, drenching and dousing the flames.²⁶

²³ I.84

²⁴ I.105

²⁵ I.191

²⁶ I.187

We see in Herodotus' Histories an epic work, undertaken by a man who was genuinely interested in preserving everything he considered to be the honest and factual truth. His methods for obtaining these truths do not match our own historical method, but he was an innovator and, I believe, did the best he could with the information he had at hand. He was not free from bias but none of us are, and even those who strive to present a factual account free from personal bias ultimately fail in their attempt, for every story is colored by the man it is filtered through. His insistence upon finding reasons behind events and motives behind men distinguishes his great work, and brings with it a certain humanity that charms the reader and makes it a masterpiece.