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HERODOTUS

(*ca.* 484–420 B.C.)

THE FATHER OF HISTORY

EVEN THE HONORIFIC title that has been bestowed on Herodotus since antiquity points to some of the most vexing problems that arise in assessing him. Its obvious meaning (and what was meant by his ancient admirers) is that the *Histories* are the first work of history as we understand it, that Herodotus created a literary genre which wove rational analysis of cause and effect into an artful narrative of events, and that, as such, it served as a model for all other ancient historians. But there is a tendency among some critics to award Herodotus the paternity without granting him the substance, to suggest that, while he paved the way for history, he himself does not deserve to be called a historian. Rather than being the "onlie begetter" of the genre, he is demoted to being only the begetter. Serious students of history and historiography, therefore, have been inclined (with a few notable exceptions) to say less of the father than of the metaphorical son—Thucydides. There can be no doubt that, to judge from what that writer says, he had little respect for any of his forerunners as historians.

Many features of the *Histories* contribute to the denigration of Herodotus as a historian. The organization of the work is loose by modern (or even Thucydidean) standards; Herodotus takes an apparently inordinate pleasure in telling stories that seem to have little relevance to his historical subject, the Persian Wars; the gods figure disproportionately in a work describing factual events; and imagination rather than careful documentation is responsible for too much of the information: How can Herodotus have known exactly what was said in Persian bedrooms? Comments on Herodotus by both ancient and modern critics reinforce the feeling that the virtue of the *Histories* lies less in historical analysis than in the pleasures of the text. Dionysius of Halicarnassus, a professed admirer of Herodotus writing in the age of Augustus, seems to damn the historian with praise that he surely did not mean to sound faint by complimenting him for choosing a topic that delighted readers; it is the charm of the work, not its historical accuracy, that he considers worthy of admiration. Plutarch, who found a great deal to object to in Herodotus, was forced to praise the style of the *Histories* for its sweetness and grace at the same time that he accused the historian of being untruthful. To cite but one modern judgment, the historian Edward Gibbon, in one of those footnotes for which *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* is justly renowned, referred to Herodotus as one "who sometimes writes for children and sometimes for philosophers."

From the very first book of the *Histories*, it is not hard to see why these two classes of people should be named as appropriate readers. The stories of the beautiful, if imposing, wife of Candaules, of Arion and the dolphin, of Peisistratus' chicanery, of Astyages' cannibalistic

dinner party, of the greatest of the Persian kings beginning his life as a simple farm boy and ending it as a wine sack—all these, on the one hand, easily excite the interest of even the most jaded of children. The emphasis on the role of fate, Solon's disquisition on the mutability of human fortune and his advice not to consider anyone happy until he is dead, the tragic tale of Adrastus and Atys—these, on the other hand, show an equal interest in ethical instruction.

Herodotus' unquestioned skill as a narrative artist leads also to comparison with his greatest predecessor in that form. Longinus calls him the "most Homeric," and Plutarch, in the passage referred to above, uses an allusion to the *Odyssey* (11.368) to impugn the veracity of the historian:

> He told "his story like a bard" not "knowingly" but sweetly and subtly.

Herodotus, indeed, invites comparison with Homer. Whole episodes seem to be designed with Homeric models in mind. When, just before embarking on the expedition to Greece, Xerxes is influenced by the advice of Artabanus to give up the enterprise, he has a dream in which a handsome young man addresses him:

> Are you changing your mind, Persian, and will you not lead your army against Greece even though you've ordered the Persians to muster? You do not do well to change and the one standing here will not forgive you. But just as you planned during the day, continue on that course. (7.12)

No reader could fail to be reminded of the "evil dream" that Zeus sent to Agamemnon at the beginning of book 2 of the *Iliad*, and no reader could fail to expect the result of obeying the vision to be as disastrous in the one case as in the other. Another clear example of imitation in episodic construction is Herodotus' description of the death of Leonidas at Thermopylae and of the struggle for his body (7.225), a passage designed to evoke the Homeric description of the struggle over the body of Patroclus.

Other features of the *Histories* seem equally Homeric. Herodotus' catalogs are reminiscent of the catalog of ships in the *Iliad* (book 2); when the historian speaks of the sailing of the twenty Athenian ships to help the Ionians in their revolt, an expedition that, in Herodotus' narrative, is one of the proximate causes of the Persian Wars, he describes it as "the beginning of evils" (5.97), a phrase that alludes to Homer's description of Paris' ships (*Iliad* 5.63) as "beginning evils." What is more, not only Herodotus in the narrative but his own characters in their speeches seem to have Homer constantly in mind. Croesus (1.45) attempts to ease the mind of Adrastus, accidental murderer of Croesus' son, with a phrase that echoes Priam's chivalrous exculpation of Helen in the *Iliad* (3.161 ff.). When Artabanus warns Mardonius of the dangers of the expedition against Greece, he imagines him "lying a prey to dogs and birds somewhere in the land of the Athenians" (7.10), a clear allusion to the opening lines of the *Iliad*. Similarly, Dionysius of Phocaea, exhorting the Ionians to energetic preparation against the Persians, says that their affairs are "on the razor's edge" (6.11), a reminiscence of a speech of Nestor's in the *Iliad* (10.169 ff.); and Pausanias, rejecting advice to crucify the Persian general (9.79), does so in words that recall Odysseus' rebuke of Eurycleia for exulting over the death of the suitors (*Odyssey* 22.411 ff.).

The preface to Herodotus' work provides the historian's views on how he is both like and unlike Homer, a demonstration of why the *Histories* are both Homeric and un-Homeric. In the very opening of the book, Herodotus announces that one of his aims is to prevent the deeds of the Greeks and the barbarians from losing glory, becoming *aklea*. This word harks back to the subject of Homeric epic, the glorious deeds of men (*klea andrōn*). And when, at the end of the preface, Herodotus declares that he will speak of great and small cities of men, he alludes as clearly to the opening of the *Od-*

yssey (1.3) as the earlier Homeric word does to the *Iliad*. To judge from these echoes, and from the Homeric quality that we have seen pervades the narrative, Herodotus is claiming the right to be read as a prose Homer, a historical writer of epic.

But if Herodotus claims this right, he affords equally clear indications of how his work differs from Homer's. In discussing the legend of Helen in Egypt, he shows that he regarded the decorum of epic as different from that of history:

> In my opinion, Homer knew this story, but since it was less suitable to epic poetry than the version he actually used, he deliberately rejected it, although he has revealed that he did in fact know it.
>
> (2.116)

The very opening words of the *Histories* display Herodotus' sense of the profound differences between his work and the epic poems, and one need only look at the first lines of the three works to see it:

> Sing, Goddess, the wrath of Achilles. . . .
> *(Iliad)*

> Tell me, Muse, of the man of many wiles. . . .
> *(Odyssey)*

> This is the demonstration of the research of Herodotus of Halicarnassus. . . .
> *(Histories)*

On the most basic level, Homer's poems are anonymous, and the invocation to the Muse (whether literally meant or merely a rhetorical gesture is irrelevant) provides the only authentication of what Homer says: he asks his divine inspirer to give knowledge of the subject, which he can learn from no other source.

Herodotus' opening is quite different. He names himself as author in the first words, and he claims sole responsibility for what he writes. Homer, in beginning the catalog of ships in the *Iliad* (book 2), had felt the need to reinvoke a divine authority to recall the specific details of the Greek force:

> for you are goddesses, are present and know all things,
> but we know only the report . . .
>
> (2.485–486)

Herodotus, by contrast, had been present at many of the places (if not the events) that he describes, and he shows no reluctance to speak in the first person of what he knows; he is also careful to distinguish the sources of his information. After he recounts the rationalized versions of early Greek-Asian hostilities in book 1, chapters 1–5, he dismisses them in order to report things "in our knowledge." When he goes to Egypt, he is careful to distinguish what he has seen from what he has heard:

> Thus far what I have said has been based on my own observation, judgment and inquiry; I am now going on to use accounts from the Egyptians, although I shall add to them things I myself have seen.
>
> (2.99)

First person statements, even second person addresses, are infrequent in Homer; in Herodotus, we are constantly made aware of an author who sifts evidence, makes judgments, and is the only person responsible, finally, for what is said.

The difference in attitude toward what is said between Homer and Herodotus is, in fact, embodied in the word that Herodotus gives his work, *historie*. Although it is usually translated as "research," its etymological connections are somewhat different. In the *Iliad*, the word *histor* occurs twice: once it is the term for an arbitrator in a lawsuit (18.401), and once the umpire at a race (23.486); in Hesiod and the *Homeric Hymns*, it refers to someone who knows, or who has a skill; in an old inscription from Thespiae, it is the word for a witness. (In

this, it is interesting to note, the development of the word in Chinese for "history" is precisely similar: *shih*, the character for "historian," also denotes an arbiter, umpire, or record keeper in a contest.) The word *historie*, therefore, implies more than mere inquiry: it suggests both the witnessing of actions and the exercise of judgment about what is seen and heard. And in that connection, the starting points of the narratives of the *Iliad* and the *Histories* offer a sharp distinction. Where Homer begins by asking which god started the quarrel of Achilles and Agamemnon, Herodotus announces that he will dismiss speculations about mythic time:

> I am not going to decide which of the two stories is true, but I shall name the man I myself know was the first to attack the Greeks unjustly and then continue with my history.
>
> (1.5)

Intimately connected with the divergence of Herodotus' ideas about authorial responsibility and about the nature of evidence from those of Homer are their differing views on the nature of their subject and of its relationship to the present. Homer speaks of a distant past, one so remote that there is no real connection between it and the present time of either the author or the audience. When he says that a hero lifted a rock so huge that it would take five men nowadays to lift, or when Nestor compares the heroes of the Trojan War with those of his youth, there is a sense of historical time only in that both Homer and his Nestor feel that there was a decline, the reasons for which are neither stated nor sought, between "then" and "now." In the same way, Hesiod, telling the story of the ages of man in the *Works and Days*, is interested only in the fact of progressive decline, but demonstrates no real curiosity about how and why age gave way to age, and offers no indication of the precise link between the mythic time of the ages and the historical time in which he wrote. Homer, his Nestor, and Hesiod all look at the past, but they have none of the historian's desire to explain its development or to use it in order to understand the origins of the present. Mythic time, in these works, is filled with discontinuities, unconnected episodes, and plain gaps.

More important, perhaps, is the fact that Homer and Hesiod demonstrate an antihistorical insistence on the lack of progress, on the mere fact of decline. This is fundamentally opposed to Herodotus' desire not only to seek causes for present events in past actions, but also to point out the first discoverers of things, to illustrate growth and positive development, as is particularly the case with political institutions. The change from tyranny to democracy, the growth of constitutions, the development of Spartan *eunomia*—"law and order"—all these subjects are the hallmarks of a writer who is interested in charting, in a historical manner, the organic connections between past and present.

It is, finally, the sense of the authorial voice and its location in time that most distinguish Herodotus from Homer. Where the epic poet is merely the medium through which tradition, in the shape of the Muse, can convey a discontinuous past to an unspecific present, Herodotus has a far more active role. He bears the responsibility for what he reports; his active judgment is employed in the sifting and arranging of his material; and, above all, it is his task to bear witness. His purpose, as he states in the opening sentence, is to preserve the great deeds of the past from losing glory and from fading away. It is the function of the historian to remind his present audience of the immediate and disturbing significance of past glory.

THE SHAPE OF THE HISTORIES

Even though Homer at the opening of the *Odyssey* invites his Muse to begin the story at a place of her own choosing, while Herodotus deliberately selects a starting place that fits his own topic, the *Histories* at first sight seem to show less care in both the selection and the arrangement of material than the Homeric poems. A Muse, perhaps, was obliged to follow

more exacting standards than a historian in the matter of constructing a work of art, but still it seems peculiar for Herodotus to claim at the start that his subject is the wars of Greece and Persia and then immediately to leap back to the history of Lydia, to give accounts of Media, Persia, Ionia, Egypt, Scythia, Libya, and Thrace before even approaching the immediate background to the Persian Wars. The arrangement of the *Histories* hardly seems to demonstrate a historian's sense of what is important.

Some features of Herodotus' narrative style would have appeared less unusual to contemporaries than to modern readers. Early Greek narrative did not proceed in a linear fashion; it was customary to begin from the point of immediate interest, then to give background, and only then to return to the starting point. Where a later writer would follow a stricter chronological or geographical framework, as in the case of Thucydides or Polybius, the archaic mode of narration encouraged backtracking and digression to such an extent that the clear line of the main narrative is at times obscured by what is contained in the back-circling rings. There are moments when Herodotus seems aware that all he says is not entirely germane to his historical subject and thus—to adapt the unfortunate schoolboy's description of Dante—stands with one foot in the archaic age and with the other reaches out toward the classical style. He defends the longest of his digressions by explaining that it is so long because its topic, Egypt, possesses more wonders than any other country (2.35); he interrupts a digression by telling us what we already know, that "my work has from the beginning sought out digressions" (4.30); he concludes an intricate excursus with "this is a digression from my main subject" (7.171). This self-consciousness indicates not embarrassment but rather a didactic interest in clarity and a firm sense of what his main subject is and is not. Herodotus has rightly been described as a man who could not cross the street without finding something interesting; his collection of *objets trouvés* should not, as J. D. Denniston has warned us, mislead readers into regarding him as little more than "an entertaining old fellow with unlimited credulity and a knack for telling amusing, sometimes improper, stories in an Ionic brogue." Rather, as Denniston shows, Herodotus' achievement as a stylist is in many ways greater than that of any other Greek prose writer.

Although Herodotus' plan of composition does not follow the rigorous chronological schematism of Thucydides (and in coping with such a vast span of time and space it would be difficult to do so), that does not mean that there is no organization. The fact that it takes Herodotus five books to get to his announced topic, the conflict between mainland Greeks and Persians that begins in the Ionian Revolt, suggests to many readers that the *Histories*, or at least the first half of the work, are something of a grab-bag, that Herodotus has thrown in everything that he happened to know about the kingdoms of the East. Some critics, in the desire to make Herodotus conform to their notion of a proper historian, have all but ignored the first half of the work; others see the first half as a work in progress, showing the author's slow development into a historian; yet others believe that what Herodotus originally wrote was a history of the Persian Empire that was then condensed and rearranged into its present unwieldy form.

An unprejudiced view of the work as a whole shows that such hypotheses are not only unnecessary, but also misleading, and give a much less complimentary portrait of the author than he deserves. Herodotus, in the first place, is interested in giving explanations and accounts of that large portion of the world that would be unfamiliar to his audience. In order to demonstrate both why the Persian Wars happened and why it was so astonishing that the Greeks won, it was also necessary to give some sense of the magnitude of the Persian Empire and of the background to the wars on both continents—for the earlier history of their own land is not likely to have been much more familiar to the Greeks than that of Persia.

After his famous preface on the reciprocal snatching of women by Greeks and Asiatics, a

passage clearly designed to poke fun at the methods of his predecessors, Herodotus takes as his starting point Croesus, the king of Lydia. Although not the first of the barbarians to attack the Greeks, he was the first to reduce some of them to tributary status and is therefore held responsible for initiating "unjust deeds." Croesus' attack on, and subsequent defeat by, Cyrus led to the subjection of the Greeks in Asia Minor to the Persian king, and when the Lydian kingdom becomes a part of Persia, Herodotus' interest naturally follows the history of the conqueror, telling how the Persian Empire had come into being and how Cyrus in particular had come to power. The basic outline of the remainder of the first half of the *Histories* follows the chronological development of the Persian Empire. It was Cyrus' successor, Cambyses, who conquered Egypt; that event is the occasion for Herodotus' most extensive digression, on Egyptian history and customs (book 2). Book 3 tells of the death of Cambyses, the constitutional crisis in Persia, and the succession of Darius (including the constitutional debate in 3.80–82), which is in turn the occasion for an extended account of the size, provinces, and wealth of the empire. In book 4 we read of the disastrous expedition of Darius to Scythia and of the conquest of Libya; again, the customs of both countries are elaborately described. Book 5 picks up the story of the aftermath of the Scythian expedition—postponed since 4.143—which leads directly to the Ionian Revolt, the uprising that provoked Darius' invasion of Greece in 490 B.C.

The second half of the *Histories* is far less digressive than the first. Having explained the rise and power of Persia and having, in digressions in books 1 and 5, explained why Athens and Sparta were the leading cities in Greece, Herodotus follows a more strictly chronological pattern. The Ionian Revolt leads to the campaign of Marathon (book 6), and the great battles of the war with Xerxes of 480–479 each receive a book: Thermopylae in book 7, Salamis in book 8, Plataea and the final sea battle of Mycale in book 9.

This picture of an orderly exposition of the reasons for the wars between Greece and Persia is, it must be admitted, achieved only by reducing the contents of the *Histories* to the barest summary; to read the work through is the surest way to shatter it. Even admirers of Herodotus must wonder what Egyptian burial customs or the amounts of radishes, onions, and garlic consumed by the pyramid builders have to do with the Ionian Revolt. How does the Scythian practice of making human skulls into drinking cups illuminate the battle of Salamis? Because the first half of the work is so discursive and so detailed, and because its connections with Herodotus' stated topic often seem fortuitous, it is easy to assume that the *Histories* reflect an intellectual growth from ethnography and geography to history, and that the great ethnographical excurses are somehow separable from each other and from the more "historical" parts of the work. These assumptions, still widely held, are based not only on the peculiar quality of the work itself but also on the fact that Herodotus' main precursor in prose was a geographer and ethnographer. The genesis of the *Histories* is thus explained by making Herodotus begin his researches as a pupil of the late sixth-century writer Hecataeus of Miletus.

Herodotus' apprenticeship, if it was that, was an irritable and at times disrespectful one. Hecataeus is mentioned several times in Herodotus' narrative, either because of his historical role in the Ionian Revolt or because of his writings—but it is precisely where he appears as genealogist or geographer that he seems to be the butt of Herodotean jokes. The amused contempt for Hecataeus' genealogical researches (2.143) and for the absurdly symmetrical maps of the world prevalent in Herodotus' day (which had been made by Hecataeus and, before him, by Anaximenes of Miletus) at 4.36 was not entirely justified. Hecataeus' geographical work, the *Tour of the Earth*, was followed extensively by Herodotus, as we know from fragments of it preserved by later authors. Even one of the most memorable phrases in Herodotus' Egyptian excursus—that describing

Egypt as "the gift of the Nile"—was a happy, if unacknowledged, borrowing from it.

The *Genealogies*, Hecataeus' other work, has a proud beginning to which Herodotus was clearly indebted: "Thus proclaims Hecataeus of Miletus: I write what I believe to be the truth; for many and ridiculous, so they seem to me, are the stories of the Greeks." This skepticism and intellectual hauteur may well have channeled Herodotus' own efforts in the direction of critical scrutiny of traditions. But the main targets of Hecataean rationalism, as far as we can tell, were legends about Heracles and the descendants of Deucalion—the territory, that is, of myth, not of history. Herodotus' introduction, then, conveys a distinction not only between himself and Homer, but between himself and Hecataeus. While the critical investigations of his predecessor were confined to the long-distant past, Herodotus' work was concerned with contemporary or near-contemporary events. Perhaps the most important difference between the two writers is that for Herodotus, geography and ethnography were not simply ends in themselves. Both subjects are subordinated to a much larger purpose, the explanation of the reasons for and the outcome of the wars of Greece and Persia. Hecataeus' writings, decisive though they were for Herodotus, must be understood as antiquarian research; they were not intended to serve as a comprehensive historical narrative.

If one views Herodotus' ethnographic digressions as isolated treatises, it is obvious that he owes a great deal to the methods of his predecessors. In the absence of information about their past and about their neighbors, the Greeks regularly used imagination to fill in the gaps; and while that impulse might be taken to indicate genuine curiosity about history or foreign customs, the neat symmetries of the results indicate that the goal of such descriptions was tidy systems, not the exposition of potentially uncooperative and discrete facts. The infinite variety and multiplicity of even those foreign customs that the Greeks did know were blurred, simplified, and distorted by ancient ethnographers on the constant and easy principle of polarity: that everything foreign was the opposite of things Greek, with the further corollary that the more remote the area, the more thoroughly it reversed Greek customs.

The appeal even to Herodotus of the polarity of Greek and other is shown by more than one passage in his work, but none is more memorable than his famous description of Egyptian customs:

> There the women go to market; the men stay at home and weave. Other people weave by pushing the weft up, the Egyptians push it down. Men carry burdens on their heads, women on their shoulders. Women urinate standing up, men sitting. They knead dough with their feet and gather mud and dung with their hands. . . . The Greeks write from left to right, the Egyptians from right to left.
>
> (2.35 ff.)

Even though Herodotus here appears to be like his predecessors in using Greek custom as the norm against which to judge others, his brisk and entertaining list does not really seem to be designed to reinforce a Greek in his high opinion of himself. Herodotus, indeed, seems to be aware of both the folly and the universality of tendentious ethnography. In speaking of the Persians, he observes that they

> honor most those who live nearest to them, give second place to those who are second nearest . . . and honor the least those who are farthest away. Thinking that they themselves are by far the best of mankind, they consider those who live farthest off to be the basest.
>
> (1.134)

But the entire argument of the *Histories* is itself a demonstration that Herodotus could not accept the validity of such beliefs. By the time of Plataea, the Persians were to regret that they had not taken the Greeks, among the farthest off from Persia, rather more seriously.

It is in the broader combinations of the ethnographic techniques of polarity and analogy,

however, that Herodotus most shows his superiority over his predecessors, and the relationship of the two largest digressions, on Egypt and Scythia, is highly instructive in demonstrating the sophistication of his techniques and of his adaptation of the manner and matter of earlier ethnography to his own larger purposes. Egypt and Scythia were as isolated as possible, geographically, historically, and culturally, from each other, but Herodotus has managed, through a combination of accurate observations, inherited errors, and original historical insights, to bind the two together and to connect them, indirectly but in significant ways, to the rest of the work. His starting point is geographical: he draws Egypt and Scythia together because (as he mistakenly reports) Nature has already done so. The two great rivers of each country, as he states repeatedly (2.26, 33–34; 4.50), correspond to each other. He makes the Nile and the Danube both flow first from west to east and then north and south, respectively, so that their mouths are directly opposite each other. As if to correspond to their comparable rivers, the two peoples share an important characteristic, their detestation of foreign customs.

At this point, however, analogy ends and polarity begins. Egypt has only one river, and Scythia many—but their number almost equals that of the canals of Egypt, all of which were constructed under the orders of one king (4.47; 2.108). While the many rivers of Scythia are the only marvel that that country offers to its geographer (4.82), Egypt has more wonders than any country on earth, and more monuments that defy description (2.35). Egypt, with its 11,340 years of human kingship and an indeterminate period of divine government, is one of the oldest of nations, while the Scythians claim that theirs is the youngest (4.5), and they can trace only 1,000 years of history.

Specific customs of the two peoples are also diametrically opposed. Egypt is "full of physicians," each highly specialized (2.84), and the people are the second-healthiest in the world (2.77). The Scythians, in contrast, "cure" royal diseases by executing anyone found guilty of swearing a false oath by the royal hearth (4.68). Scythians never bathe in water, but instead "howl with joy" during their more pleasurable, if less salubrious, hashish saunas (4.75). Egyptian priests, on the other hand, bathe four times a day in cold water (2.37), and the entire nation prizes cleanliness. The Egyptians, the most skilled of all peoples in preserving the memory of the past, have also invented and passed on to the Greeks geometry (2.109), the names of the twelve gods (2.50), the methods of divination, and the methods of establishing public assemblies, processions, and litanies (2.58). They have developed many other customs adopted by the Greeks, including a law brought by Solon to Athens which is, according to Herodotus, a perfect law, and one which he hopes the Athenians will keep forever (2.177). Scythia, on the other hand, has no images, no temples (except to Ares, the god of war, 4.59), and, in general, no admirable arts. Like Archilochus' hedgehog, indeed, the Scythians have learned only one great thing, and Herodotus attributes it not to their ingenuity, but to their nomadic way of life (4.46): they have the ability to remain invincible and unapproachable.

In the contrast between the single wisdom and success of the otherwise unadmirable Scythians and the military failure of contemporary Egypt, the civilization most renowned for learning and sophistication, we may begin to see some reasons for the interconnection of the two digressions. In the sixth century B.C., Egypt was totally unable to resist the invasion of the most incompetent of the Persian kings, the lunatic Cambyses; but it was one of Egypt's earliest rulers, Sesostris, who had conquered Scythia, a victory that eluded Darius, surely one of the greatest of Persian rulers. Herodotus, indeed, makes that contrast explicit. When Darius desired to set up his own statue before that of Sesostris, the priest of Hephaestus did not permit it, saying that Darius had not equaled Sesostris' deeds, for Sesostris had subdued as many nations as Darius and had conquered the Scythians as well. Darius, it was reported, gave

way to the priest (2.110). Egypt, though clearly a subject of great interest to Herodotus, was by the historian's lifetime a nation of defeated archivists and museum keepers. Scythia had won, or at least had not been conquered by the Persians; though its inhabitants might be nasty and brutish, its existence as a free nation was not short.

The elaborate web of connections and oppositions that binds the descriptions of Egypt and Scythia together has wider ramifications. In many ways, it is something like a text of the Heraclitean universe, which "by being at variance, agrees with itself; there is an adjustment of opposite tensions, like that of the bow or the lyre." Once the contrasts between the two most antithetical societies known to the Greeks are seen to bear directly on their success or failure in dealing with Greece's major enemy, the Persian Empire, it becomes clear that they also have a considerable significance for the explanation of the Greek defeat of Persia as well. In some sense, Herodotus portrays Greece as the synthesis of Egypt and Scythia, and the connections between Greece and the two opposite countries are mentioned more than once in the course of the *Histories*. Through its adaptation of Egyptian customs and learning, Greece has acquired elements of civilization that Herodotus can admire. But in her poverty, in comparison with the wealth of Lydia or Persia, Greece has maintained the hardiness of a primitive state. Its civilization has not softened it so much that it cannot fight bravely, and its victory is not, like Scythia's, a function of impassable terrain and nomadic life, but rather the result of its peculiar combination of intellectual and physical strength. The whole intricate and detailed argument that has been briefly summarized here is encapsulated in the remarks Herodotus attributes to Demaratus, the Spartan exile in the court of Xerxes:

> Greece has always had poverty as her companion, while courage she has acquired, attaining it through wisdom and firm law; by using courage Greece defends herself against poverty and bondage.
>
> (7.102)

Far from being mere curiosities of antiquarian learning, the digressions in Herodotus, like the allusions to divine intervention (to which we must turn next), serve the larger historical argument that organizes, connects, and controls the entire work.

HOMERIC GODS, IONIAN IDEAS

In many respects, the Homeric qualities of Herodotean narrative and the frequent allusions to the role of fate or the gods in the *Histories* tend to detract from appreciation of the merit of the work as history. Indeed, it must be admitted that neither rationalism nor a scientific concern for the workings of human causes on human effects is the immediate impression conveyed by the work. For if Herodotus believes that the gods had a decisive role in mortal affairs, then it is difficult to expect him to proceed in a historical manner, as the use of divine causation suggests the imposition of a violent discontinuity between one action and its result. It is therefore necessary, if we are to appreciate the historical achievement of Herodotus, to devote some space to examining the role of the divine in his work.

There are, to be sure, supernatural forces at work in the *Histories*, but they are not omnipresent, nor do they seem to work in any particularly irrational, hostile, or personal fashion. The individual Olympian gods, in fact, are remarkably absent. No Athena appears, as she does in the *Iliad*, to pull the hair of a Themistocles; no warrior in the Persian Wars is snatched away in a mist. Nor does Herodotus, for the most part, mention the names of the specific gods except in reporting the beliefs, thoughts, and actions of others. Instead, he uses far more generalized terms, and refers to "the god" or "the divine" in a most un-Homeric manner. When he does refer to the individual

gods, indeed, he is capable of severely rational skepticism. In narrating the invasion of Xerxes in 480 B.C., he describes the valley of Tempe in Thessaly:

> The Thessalians say that Poseidon made the gorge through which the Peneios flows and the story is a reasonable one; for whoever thinks that Poseidon shakes the earth and that chasms which are the results of earthquakes are the works of this god, would say on seeing this gorge that Poseidon made it. It is the work of an earthquake, as it plainly appeared to me, this cleft in the mountains.
>
> (7.129)

That Herodotus does not believe in the necessity of equating an earthquake with the action of a god is clear from this passage; but it is equally clear that he recognizes that others do make such equations. And if he does not himself stress the role of gods in human affairs, he knows and reports extensively the beliefs of others. While the gods do not, as a rule, intervene in Herodotus' historical universe, the belief of the actors in his narrative in their intervention was of no small importance. Croesus believed in Delphi, and his belief led him into disastrous error. Amasis believed in divine envy of human success, and his belief led him (at least in Herodotus' account) to break off relations with Polycrates. The gods are a constant factor in Herodotus' *Histories*, but their importance lies less in their objective presence than in the influences exerted on men by belief in them. Herodotus is capable of offering criticism even of this role of the gods. He is impatient with the Spartans for being so scrupulous in divine observance that they missed battles, and even more remarkable is the attitude toward Delphi implicit in his discussion of the Athenian role in the Greek victory: after saying that it was the Athenians who saved Greece, he goes on to point out that they did so despite the prophecies of Apollo:

> Not even the threatening oracles that came from Delphi and threw them into terror could persuade them to abandon Greece, but, standing firm, they endured the invasion of their country.
>
> (7.139)

Far from emphasizing the role of the gods in the victory, Herodotus is here on the brink of praising the Athenians for their Olympian disregard of Delphi, for divinely ignoring the divine.

The gods do act in Herodotus. They send Polycrates' ring back to him in the belly of a fish (3.42); they send rain to quench the pyre on which Croesus was to be burned (1.87); they create a storm off Euboea that nearly equalizes the number of Greek and Persian ships (8.13). But although Herodotus can make his Solon tell Croesus that "the divine is wholly jealous and fond of baffling us" (1.32), Herodotus himself is extremely sparing in speaking of divine jealousy *(phthonos)* as a historical cause. There are slightly more than twenty uses of the word in Herodotus, and of those passages only six have to do with the envy of the gods. More striking, five of these passages are in speeches or letters, notably the advice of Solon to Croesus (quoted above), of Amasis to Polycrates (3.40), of Artabanus to Xerxes (7.10). And in the context of addressing a tyrant or monarch, it is certainly reasonable for an adviser to suggest that any mishap that may befall him is less the result of his own error or rash action than of the envious intervention of a hostile deity. It would certainly have been rash for Artabanus to suggest to Xerxes that the expedition to Greece was likely to fail because it did not deserve to succeed. The single instance in which Herodotus speaks of divine envy in his own person, moreover, while certainly lurid, is scarcely an example either of arbitrary action by the gods or of extensive manipulation of human history by them. The passage in question is at the end of book 4, where Herodotus recounts the death of Pheretima, the ruler of Cyrene. That gentle woman had nailed her enemies on crosses in a circle, cut off the breasts of their wives, and nailed them up too. Herodotus offers a moral conclusion to this edifying tale:

> Nor did Pheretima weave her life to a successful end. As soon as she returned to Egypt from Libya after taking vengeance on the people of Barca, she died horribly. While she was still alive, she seethed with worms, since over-violent punishments enacted by human beings are hated by the gods.
>
> (4.205)

Even though Herodotus here speaks of mankind becoming the object of envy or resentment *(epiphthonoi)* of the gods, the actions of Pheretima are such that divine intervention is scarcely irrational, or an example of their being "fond of baffling us"; one would be much more inclined, in such an instance, to speak of divine justice.

Even the most vivid and emphatic actions of the gods in Herodotus seem to concern the fate of individuals like Pheretima and to have little real connection with the main structures of historical causation. The most famous example of the role of divine envy in Herodotus—perhaps because it comes at the very beginning of the *Histories*—is the story of Solon and Croesus. This story, the truth of which has been doubted on chronological grounds, falls into several parts. When Solon came to visit Croesus, who was the richest of all men and, according to Herodotus, at the height of his power and prosperity, the king asked the Athenian sage, after showing him his treasuries and all his wealth, who was the most fortunate of men. The word that Croesus used for "fortunate," *olbios*, is ambiguous: it means either prosperous or happy. Croesus used it in the first sense, but Solon took it in the second, and he gave two examples of men he thought truly fortunate, thus angering Croesus greatly. On being questioned about his reasons, Solon gave the reply quoted above, about the jealousy of the gods and the insecurity of human existence:

> For to my mind, you are very rich and king over many people; but as for that question you asked me I cannot yet answer you until I learn that you have ended your life happily. . . . Whoever has the greatest number of advantages and, keeping them to the end, dies a peaceful death, this man, O king, in my opinion, justly bears the name "happy." We must, in every matter, look to the end; for often the god gives men a glimpse of happiness and then ruins them utterly.
>
> (1.32)

The second episode in this story follows immediately upon the visit of Solon, and its importance is marked by the manner in which Herodotus introduces it:

> After Solon's departure, a great vengeance [*Nemesis*] from god seized Croesus, because, as I guess, he thought himself the happiest of men.
>
> (1.34)

The tale that follows is singularly tragic. Croesus dreams that one of his two sons was to be killed by an iron weapon, and consequently he keeps the boy from all warfare and similar activities. But, under the supervision of Adrastus, a suppliant who has taken refuge with Croesus, he sends the son to take part in a hunting expedition, where he is killed by a misdirected shot by the same Adrastus.

No one could deny that this episode displays the workings of the divine in human affairs, that it displays a tragic attitude toward the meaninglessness of the vicissitudes of mortal fortune. Indeed, the passage is almost suspiciously tragic. *Nemesis*, divine vengeance, is mentioned only here in the *Histories*; the name of the instrument of fate, Adrastus, is not only the name of a tragic figure, the hero who knows his own fate but cannot avert it, but Adrasteia, "she from whom one cannot run away," is a cult title of Nemesis in Aeschylus. The whole episode is not only tragic; it is, quite literally, a tragedy.

But to say that the gods are responsible for the unpredictability of human life, and that happiness is rarely constant, is far from saying that all historical events are divinely determined. The third and climactic episode in the story of Croesus demonstrates that. After re-

ceiving the ambiguous oracle from Delphi that "if he should march against the Persians, he would destroy a great empire" (1.53), Croesus attacked Cyrus, the Persian king. The empire destroyed was not, of course, that of Cyrus, but Croesus' own. When he was taken prisoner, Cyrus put him on a pyre in order to burn him alive; Croesus, on the pyre, remembered the warning of Solon and called the Athenian's name aloud, so that Cyrus, being curious, asked the meaning of the name:

> Then Cyrus, hearing from the interpreters what Croesus had said, changed his mind and reflected that he, a mortal man, was burning alive another mortal, one who had been no less fortunate than himself; moreover, fearing retribution and thinking that nothing human is secure, he ordered that the blazing fire be extinguished as quickly as possible and that Croesus and those with him be brought down from the pyre. This they tried to do, but did not succeed.
>
> (1.86)

What Cyrus could not do, the gods did. Croesus called on Apollo for aid:

> Weeping, he called upon the god and suddenly in a clear and windless sky clouds gathered and a storm broke, with such violent rains that the pyre was extinguished.
>
> (1.87)

Here, without any doubt, the gods are taking a very active role in human affairs. But two reservations are in order. In the first place, in this part of the story, as in the tragedy of Adrastus, the gods' role is limited to the personal happiness or salvation of an individual. In the section of the story of Croesus that has the most historical importance, his attack on, and defeat by, Cyrus, Herodotus offers quite human reasons for the events. Croesus attacks Cyrus not because of Nemesis, but because of his greed for land (1.73). He is defeated not because of the gods, but because his tactics are singularly stupid; after he fights an indecisive battle, he simply disbands his army and does not expect Cyrus to continue the war. When Cyrus does invade, Croesus is totally unprepared, and he is, therefore, defeated. In these matters, we are told nothing of direct influence by the gods; their only role is in sending the ambiguous oracles to Croesus, and that he misinterprets them is his fault, not theirs, a result of his willingness to believe what he wants, and thus to be seen as part of his character, not of divine causation.

In the second place, the miraculous salvation of Croesus is told in very curious language. The storm sweeps out of a clear sky, and suddenly all is well. One should compare this to a passage from the most famous poem of none other than Solon himself, describing the justice that comes from Zeus:

> But Zeus oversees the end of all, and suddenly, just as a spring wind scatters the clouds, a wind which stirs up the depths of the unplowed sea with its many waves, ravages in the wheat-bearing land the fair works of men, reaches the sky, the lofty seat of the gods, and makes the sky clear again, the warmth of the sun shines over the fertile land, there are no clouds in sight—such is the vengeance of Zeus. . . .
>
> (frag. 13, w. 17 ff.)

Both the scene between Solon and Croesus at the beginning of the story, and this description of Croesus' miraculous rescue (the result of calling on the name of Solon), seem redolent of the language and the attitudes of Solon's own writings. One may suspect (although it can by no means be proved) that, as in the mock-historical account of the origins of the Trojan War in the preface, so here the literary reminiscence is deliberate. At the least, these scenes work as a kind of *tour de force*, comparable to imitations of Homer in battle scenes; here we have imitations of the great poet and sage in an ethical context. In particular, Herodotus seems to be taking slightly less than seriously an attitude, toward the world that, if true, would completely preclude the possibility of writing logical or analytic history.

The high-minded stance of the Athenian and

his gloomy understanding of what it means to be human are to a certain extent undermined by the far more practical reaction of another Athenian who visits Croesus. This time it is Alcmaeon, an ancestor of the man who used the great wealth of his family to abolish the Peisistratid tyranny and to establish democracy. Alcmaeon comes to Sardis to be reimbursed for a service he had rendered to Croesus and is offered as much gold as he can carry on his person. His greedy acceptance results in so ludicrous a transformation of his appearance that he "resembles anything rather than a human being." Croesus laughs and gives him more (6.125). The story works almost as a witty inversion of the Solon-Croesus encounter, and the best joke is that if Alcmaeon had shared his fellow citizens' scorn for Croesus' wealth, his descendants might not have been rich enough to bribe first the Delphic oracle and second the Lacedaemonians into helping them banish the tyrants and establish the democracy (5.62–63)—without which there would have been no Greek victory over Persia. Herodotus himself does not explicitly make these connections, but here as elsewhere he shows his respect for commonsensical action which cares not a whit for timid flutterings about divine jealousy.

No one, I think, could deny that Herodotus' *Histories* are overdetermined, that his views allow room for both divine and human causes for events. But it would be rash, on the basis of the few occurrences of divine envy and the limited number of specific interventions of gods in specific human events, to suggest that a belief in the gods prevented Herodotus from offering historical judgments. That something is fated to happen—as many things are in Herodotus—may mean as little as that they do happen. Even the fact that the god, or fate, or necessity, knows that Croesus is destined to be defeated by Cyrus does not mean that *he* knows it or acts in the light of such a destiny. More important is the fact that any divine arrangement does not prevent, or even interfere with, the chain of human causation that binds the *Histories* together. The reason the Persian Empire first comes into contact with the Greeks is that Cyrus conquered Croesus and that Croesus had previously conquered the Greeks. That important chain of events may ultimately have been the result of some divine plan—but Herodotus never even hints at it.

That the primary mode of divine intervention in human affairs is not envy, then, is clear; and a number of the incidents discussed lead to a different conception: that it is retribution or justice that is involved. Herodotus himself, in one passage, offers a different and rather more pleasant assessment of the activity of the gods. In describing the marvels that are found in various exotic provinces of the Persian Empire, Herodotus discourses on the winged serpents that guard the frankincense-bearing trees of Arabia, and before discussing the manner in which their number is kept down, he offers the following observation:

> And it would seem that the forethought of the divine, being wise, just as is to be expected, has made prolific all creatures which are timid and edible in order that they might not become extinct by being eaten up, while those creatures which are savage and dangerous, it has made very unfruitful.
>
> (3.108)

The contrasting examples that Herodotus gives for this assertion are the rapidly breeding rabbit and the lioness, who (in Herodotean zoology, at any rate) bears only one cub, and no more:

> The reason for this is as follows: when the cub begins to stir in its mother, having claws much sharper than those of other creatures, it tears the womb and as it grows, it scratches much more; by the time of the birth, almost nothing of the womb is left whole.
>
> (3.108)

The dismal and tragic existence of the winged serpents (the occasion for Herodotus' meditation on divine forethought) is equally instructive. We are told that they would overrun the

earth were it not for the fact that the female kills the male at the very moment of impregnation, and that murder is avenged (the word is *tisis*) by the offspring who dispose of this archetypal Clytemnestra as they are born.

In the natural history embodied in these chapters, we have the rudiments of quite a different system of divine control of the world than that suggested by the concept of divine envy. While the same event might be interpreted from different points of view—the victim of cosmic forethought might well consider it, on a more personal scale, as malice or envy—a world that is governed by a system involving divine forethought or *tisis* is a far more orderly place than one in which any disgruntled divinity can wreak his will on a harmless human being.

Tisis (retribution) appears in a cosmic context in the writings of one of Herodotus' Ionian predecessors, the sixth-century philosopher Anaximander, in a remarkably similar manner, one which suggests that the historian was not totally out of touch with philosophical speculation. One of the very few extant quotations from Anaximander reads:

> The things that are pass away into those things from which they come to be, in accordance with necessity; for they render to each other penalty and requital (*díkē* and *tisis*) for their injustice, in accordance with the arrangement of time.
>
> (title unknown)

In this sentence, the interrelationship of "the things that are" is described through a legal metaphor. The encroachment of each thing on the territory of another is injustice, but in the end, because everything has to pay for this injustice, a balance is maintained among them. What is remarkable about this idea, it has been observed, is that it is a way of talking about the continuity and stability of natural change that does not involve the unpredictable intervention of the gods, but expresses, through the notions of *tisis* and *díkē*, a self-regulating mechanism of cosmic order. Like Herodotus, however, Anaximander did not leave the gods completely out of the picture, although the precise working out of his cosmology is not, because of the poor state of preservation of the fragments, particularly clear. We do know that he spoke of the indefinite, which he called "the divine," and that he endowed this indefinite with Homeric attributes for the gods, "immortal" and "unaging," and that he said that it was this divine indefinite that "steers all and governs all." Whatever the relationship of the two fragments is, it is clear that above the equal opposites, which continually pay one another for their injustice, there is a divine something that supervises the workings of the system.

It is the combination of the divine and the concept of requital that appears, in very similar language, in Herodotus' discussion of animal life in book 3. It is divine forethought that makes sure that weak animals survive, and it is the same aspect of the divine that makes certain that winged serpents do not overrun mankind. But it is not by intervention in the case of specific animals or at every moment; divine forethought, in its wisdom, has set up a system which regulates itself, which maintains, by law, a balance in nature.

A system of checks and balances operates in Herodotus on a far wider scale than just as it applies to rabbits, lions, and winged serpents, and it is worth looking in this light at the context of Herodotus' discussion of divine forethought. It is found in the long section of book 3 on the extreme regions of the earth. Having begun in 3.89 to describe the extent and organization of Darius' empire, he progresses in chapter 97 to its farthest regions, the Indians and Ethiopians, Arabia and the Caucasus. Having described the tribute received from these places, Herodotus concludes:

> The ends of the earth, it would seem, have by lot the most excellent blessings, in the same way that Greece has been assigned by far the most excellently mixed climate.
>
> (3.106)

A complex system of balances is in operation here. Even though the extreme regions are ex-

cessively hot or cold, the rigors of the climate are offset by the vast amounts of wonders they contain: gold, the largest horses and birds, wool-bearing trees, spices, and sheep with tails so long that they have to be carried in little carts. But even within this, the fortunate people of Arabia pay a penalty for the blessing of their frankincense in having to fight off the winged serpents, while those serpents in turn pay a penalty for their viciousness in the perpetual tragedy that their families reenact. Divine forethought is indeed wise, and Herodotus has seen the extent of its wisdom in far more detail than (as far as we can tell) Anaximander had. For Herodotus extends the concept of a divine order and balance from the warring elements to animals, and from animals to geography. The description of the ends of the earth embodies a sort of geography of *tisis* and *díkē*, a vision of the physical world reflecting the same principles of balanced distribution and retribution that is reflected in the animal kingdom.

Herodotus' familiarity with Ionian speculations about the order of the visible world, their adoption of systems that did not rest on the unpredictable and unreliable interventions of the Homeric gods, their theories about physical and geographical causes of human characteristics, is evident. It is an extremely important factor, for one thing, in understanding the shape of the *Histories*, and even their starting point. For Herodotus the great geographical polarity around which the work (and the events with which he is concerned) is shaped is the conflict of East and West, of Europe and Asia. He begins the work with Ionian Greece, the center, in any such system, of the known world, having characteristics of both sides, and located in a sort of limbo between the Greeks of the mainland and the Asiatics. From conflict between the Ionians and Croesus, the pattern stretches out, as the work progresses, in both directions: Croesus' war with Cyrus brings the Persians (farther east) into contact with Ionia, the Athenians' involvement in the Ionian Revolt brings them into conflict with Persia. What is more, his interest, as we have seen, in the balances and the significance of geography offers at least a partial explanation for the discursive and ethnographic nature of the first half of the work; far from being evidence of his growth from mere geographer into true historian, it is a crucial element in the understanding of human history. For Herodotus, geography teaches; it shows laws and patterns in a world that is not governed by the whim of the gods but is ordered providentially. To quote from Gibbon once again: "Man vanishes, but geography remains through the boundless annals of time."

But the neat balances and antitheses proposed in Ionian speculation, although they attempted to describe the visible world, fail in their relevance to empirical reality, and in that the historian goes beyond them. One clear example is to be found in Herodotus' comment on the map of Anaximander and Hecataeus, which was apparently an elegant, but unfortunately imaginary, diagram:

> Indeed, I laugh when I see that many before now have drawn maps of the world, not one of them explaining matters sensibly: Ocean they make flowing around the world which they draw round as if shaped by a pair of compasses, with Asia and Europe of exactly the same size.
>
> (4.36)

Perhaps because of the well-known Greek aversion to experimental science, the early Ionian thinkers developed theories that were only that, and failed to take into account those concrete and specific facts which make a mockery of any broad generalization. The author of the Hippocratic treatise *Airs, Waters and Places* may offer, as a nod to reality, his observation (24) that the soft nature of people who dwell in meadowy regions may be stiffened up by the imposition of law, thus admitting that humans are not totally at the mercy of a theoretical system; Herodotus makes it his business, throughout the *Histories*, to investigate all the particular events that lead up to the creation of laws. In that sense, it may be just to describe Herodotus as being Homeric; for the epic world is not inhabited by theories or by type-characters, but by individuals, and it is their particularity, not

their universality, that provides the model for historical narrative.

Herodotus' handling of a single crucial question, the cause of the defeat of the Persians in 480, may serve as a guideline for understanding how vast is the gap that, finally, separates him from both Homeric divine causation and from the systematic theories of the Ionian philosophers. If Herodotus were truly a believer in the activity of the gods in all human events, the argument we would expect him to use actually does appear in the *Histories*; but it is in a speech that he puts into the mouth of Themistocles:

> Let us refrain—now that we have had the good luck to save ourselves and our country, repelling so great a cloud of men—from pursuing the fleeing forces. For it is not we who have achieved this deed, but the gods and the heroes, who were jealous that one man be king of Asia and of Europe too, especially a man who is both wicked and impious; one who has made no distinction between temples and private property; who has burnt and cast down the images of the gods; who has flogged the sea and has thrown fetters into it. (8.109)

This superstitious thought—that the defeat of Persia was not the result of the cleverness or courage of the Athenians, but of the retribution of the gods for the impiety of Xerxes—is not one that we expect to find voiced by the cynical Themistocles, the man who tricked the Persians into fighting at Salamis. In fact, the context shows that this idea too is being used by Themistocles for his own ends. The speech of the Athenian general is given here in the hope of persuading the Greeks not to pursue the Persians into Asia, because, as Herodotus explains, he spoke "in the hope of establishing a claim upon the King." In other words, Themistocles invokes the presence of the gods less because he believes in it than because he expects it to convince the superstitious multitude he is addressing.

There could be no greater contrast to this than Herodotus' own analysis of the causes of the Greek victory in 7.139. Announcing that he will offer an opinion that he knows will not be liked by his readers, he asserts that the primary cause of the defeat of Persia was the Athenian decision to resist at all costs:

> Had the Athenians, dreading the coming danger, left their own country or had they not left it but remained and surrendered themselves to Xerxes, then no one would have tried to resist the King by sea. If no one had resisted by sea, then this is what would have happened by land: even if the Peloponnesians had cloaked the Isthmus with walls, still the Lacedaemonians would have been deserted by their allies—not a voluntary betrayal, but a necessary one, since their cities would have been captured one by one by the fleet of the barbarian and finally the Lacedaemonians would have stood alone and, standing alone, after a tremendous show of valor would have died nobly. . . . So, if a man were to say that the Athenians were the saviors of Greece, he would not be exaggerating the facts. Whichever side they took, to that side the balance was sure to incline. By choosing that Greece remain free, they themselves roused to battle all the rest of the Greeks, as many as had not yet turned traitor, and they themselves (next to the gods) drove off the King.

The clear and logical explanation of what would have happened without Athens is a demonstration of the truth of his initial statement, that it was the Athenians who saved Greece. What is more, it comes as the climax to a series of sections in which Herodotus had traced the political development of Athens from the murder of Hipparchus in 514 B.C. to the battle of Marathon in 490. The theme of those sections is the celebration of the value of freedom. Even though, before the constitutional reforms of Cleisthenes, Athens had been inferior to her neighbors in the arts of war, once she had shaken off the tyrants, she was able to defeat the Boeotians, Chalcidians, Spartans, and Aeginetans with terrifying efficiency. Herodotus gives his explanation for this:

> It is clear, therefore, that while they were oppressed by a tyrant, they willingly played the

coward, as men do who work for a master; but when they were freed, each one was eager to achieve something for himself.

(5.78)

The resounding success of Marathon, in which 6,400 Persians, but only 192 Athenians, were killed, and the great battles of the war with Xerxes only confirm our impression of the advantages of *isegoria*, the right of free speech in the Assembly. The chain of causation of the Greek victory stretches back through the Athenian decision to resist the Persians in 480 to the military courage and success that are made possible by democratic political institutions.

This is neither a pious insistence on divine causes nor the abstract speculation of the Ionians. Although his statement about the military value of freedom in 5.78 has a clear parallel in a generalization about the weakness of Asiatic peoples in an Ionian medical text, it is here placed in a context of specific information and a great amount of detail about individuals, laws, events, and battles that amounts to a precise and careful historical argument. What is more, although Herodotus gives the gods some credit for the victory in a perfunctory parenthesis, "next to the gods" (and in 8.13 he even gives "the god" credit for equalizing the numbers of the Greek and Persian fleets), they have little place in the analysis. It is an argument about the human causes of success, not the divine causes of failure. We are not told, as in the story of Croesus, that Xerxes was afflicted by Nemesis, or that divine envy grudged the Persians a victory. And if, as Themistocles says, the gods did not want one man to rule two continents—an argument that is in close accord with Herodotus' geography of *tisis* and *díkē*—those gods are far in the background. Within the parameters of divine forethought, it is still up to humans to act rationally and intelligently: it was the Athenians, not divine forethought, who defeated the Persians. Within the system of divine balances that Herodotus recognized, it was still the glory of the great deeds of human beings whose memory he sought to preserve.

THE MAKING OF A HISTORIAN

Even if Herodotus had been totally immersed in the speculative philosophies of Ionia, the facts of his life and the age in which he lived would not lead one to expect him to be purely a theoretician. He was born at Halicarnassus (now Bodrum), in the southwestern corner of Turkey, probably in the year 484 B.C.—between the campaigns of Marathon and the great invasion of Xerxes. Halicarnassus was a city of Dorian Greeks who had intermarried extensively with the native Carian population; Herodotus was a member of such a mixed family, one of considerable importance in the city. Nor was he the first member of his family to have literary aspirations; one of his relatives (probably an uncle), Panyassis, wrote epic poems on Heracles and on the foundations of the cities of Ionia. It is scarcely surprising that in the *Histories* Herodotus shows a considerable interest in both subjects.

As an inhabitant of a city that had sent ships in Xerxes' expedition, and one whose status was directly affected by the Athenian victory and subsequent conquests in the eastern Aegean, Herodotus could not help being aware of the crucial role that the Persian Wars had played in the lives of all Greeks; though he may not have been old enough to remember the wars himself, he must have known veterans of the campaigns. Herodotus himself was not merely a bookish figure: the love of freedom that so animates his work played a significant part in his life. The brief biography in the ancient lexicon *Suda* records that he was driven into exile for intriguing against the tyrant Lygdamis and that he then returned to Halicarnassus when Lygdamis had been expelled.

Although it is probably fruitless to speculate on the circumstances that create a historian, there are certain striking parallels, even in this meager material, with the life of Thucydides. Like Herodotus, Thucydides' family was of mixed blood (in his case Thracian and Athenian); like Herodotus, Thucydides spent much of his life in exile from his native Athens. It is

easy to see why Herodotus would have been drawn to the subject of the Persian Wars. Coming from an area that was, at least while he was growing up, on the frontier between Athenian and Persian influence; having been forced, by exile, to see more of the world than the average fifth-century Greek; being a member of a family that was neither Athenian nor Ionian nor Persian, but a combination of Dorian Greek and Carian, he will have acquired a certain distance from easy sympathy with any of the participants in the politics of the Aegean world. At the same time, his political activity will have given him a keen sense of the value of liberty and of the importance of the Persian Wars in determining the fate not only of Halicarnassus but of all Greece.

Whether or not the ancient biography is correct in saying that Herodotus returned to Halicarnassus after the fall of Lygdamis we cannot tell; but it seems unlikely that he spent much time there. The *Histories* give abundant evidence of the breadth of his travels. He was certainly in Egypt; he spent a considerable time in Samos, an island for which his affection is obvious, and he was well acquainted with Athens, Sparta, and Delphi. It is often said that he spent considerable time at Athens, in part because of a dubious tradition in an unreliable source that the Athenians gave him an immense sum of money (ten talents) for a reading of his work. He may well have given readings there, but it is equally likely that he did so at the Panhellenic festival at Olympia. As for his travels, so for his occupation, the only clues are to be found in his work, but these clues are even more unreliable. Some critics have concluded, from the number of references to commerce in the *Histories*, that his travels were the result of his being a merchant; but from the subjects in which he expresses interest in his work, we might just as well conclude that he was an architect, a doctor, a chef, a mortician, a botanist, or a priest. On such questions, speculation is not profitable.

On the later years of his life, we have slightly more information. We know that in 443 B.C. he was one of the settlers of Thurii, a colony founded under Athenian leadership on the site of the former city of Sybaris in southern Italy. Participation in this colony may have been of great significance for Herodotus, and Thurii was, in any case, an extraordinary venture. Pericles was probably responsible for it, and Thurii was designed not as a purely Athenian colony, but as a Panhellenic city. Peaceful coexistence within one set of walls of Athenians, Dorians, and others did not last long, despite the presence in the city of a number of men of great intellectual stature (it is pleasant to imagine Herodotus in Thurii conversing with Hippodamus of Miletus, the town planner, the orator Lysias, the philosophers Protagoras and Empedocles). Thurii played out in miniature its own version of the Peloponnesian War, beginning within ten years of the foundation of the colony. There was a war with Dorian Tarentum, a quarrel over whose colony it really was (which ended with Delphic Apollo being named as the founder of the place), and internal civil war *(stasis)* between Dorians and Ionians which had probably broken out within Herodotus' lifetime. After his death, the dispute was resolved in favor of Sparta rather than Athens, and the Thurians aided the Spartans during the Ionian War in 411 B.C.

Of the date and place of Herodotus' death we cannot be certain. A Byzantine source records a grave inscription for the historian at Thurii, and there is no reason to doubt it. Many scholars have assumed, from the detailed references to events in Athens in the early years of the Peloponnesian War (the latest is to an incident in 430), that he left Thurii in disgust with its internal *stasis* and returned to Athens. But, given that the Greeks in the West kept in touch with the mainland through regular commerce and through visits to the Panhellenic shrines of Olympia and Delphi, there is no reason to assume he left Thurii. It is perfectly reasonable to believe that he died in the West in the early 420's.

The circumstances of Herodotus' birth and early life at Halicarnassus and his mature years and death at Thurii provide a suitable frame for the making of the historian. But there is more to

it than that. To progress, in the space of fifty years, from witnessing the triumphant defeat of the barbarians by the unified forces of the Greeks to seeing the Hellenic world split by the struggle between Dorian and Ionian, to see the liberating Athenians turn into a new, and possibly more oppressive, imperial power replacing the Great King, to settle in a colony whose purpose was to exemplify the unity of the Greeks, and to live through its dissolution through *stasis*—all this would be enough to make the least curious of men wonder what had happened, and Herodotus was far from being the least curious of men.

To find the origin of the *Histories* in a melancholy contemplation of decline and dissolution may seem to be at odds with the lofty and apparently optimistic tone of Herodotus' description of the Greek triumph of 480 B.C., but these two moods are by no means mutually exclusive. Various observations throughout the work seem to suggest that at least one of the reasons for Herodotus' writing was to point out to his contemporaries the difference between what they were doing and what their fathers had done. The opening sentence of the work, in fact, seems to direct the reader's attention to that possibility in two ways. In the first place, the tone is curiously negative; Herodotus defines his purpose as:

> In order that the memory of the past may not be effaced among men by time and that the great and marvellous achievements done by Greeks and by barbarians may not lack renown.

The sentence suggests that the great deeds of the Persian Wars are, at the time of writing, in danger of becoming *exitela*, effaced or faded, and *aklea*, without renown or memory.

In the second place, a contemporary reader would have found something rather odd about the definition of Herodotus' subject that emerges in the course of the work. In the opening the topic is announced as the wars of the Greeks and Persians, and the last event of his narrative, at the end of book 9, is the siege of Sestos in 479 B.C., a campaign in which the Greeks secured a Persian fortress on the European side of the Hellespont. Perhaps because it is, in fact, Herodotus who has defined the Persian Wars for us, we tend to think of that date as an appropriate stopping point; a contemporary audience is unlikely to have shared that belief. They would have remembered, for example, the battle of the Eurymedon in the early 460's, an even greater victory over Persia. They would have remembered the campaigns of the Athenian general Cimon and the great expansion of Athenian naval power at the expense of Persia in the years after Sestos. And they would have remembered that the formal end of the Persian Wars had taken place only in 448, with the Peace of Callias (although the existence of such a formal act is still disputed). To someone reading the *Histories* in the late fifth century, Herodotus' silence about what happened after 479 would have been as vivid as what he had said about the earlier campaigns.

Many reasons have been suggested for Herodotus' choice of ending, and a number of them seem plausible. For one thing, after Sestos the war had a very different character. It was waged in what Herodotus himself called the territory of the Persian (8.3); it became a war of aggression, not one of defense. As important, perhaps, is the fact that after Sestos, the Spartans withdrew from the war, and it was no longer the war of the Greeks and the Persians, but of the Athenians and their allies and the Persians. Had Herodotus continued the story to 448 B.C., he could not have ignored what went on in Greece at the same time: the growth of Athenian power, the so-called First Peloponnesian War of the middle of the century. In the narrative of the great battles of the Persian Wars of 490 and 480–479, Herodotus was able to describe and admire the unification of Greece against a common danger; had he gone on, he would have been compelled to describe the contentious divorce of the former yokefellows.

For some readers, both Herodotus' choice of subject and his choice of stopping place seem to have a very specific motivation, the praise

and defense of Athens. Perhaps the most important piece of evidence in favor of such a view is Herodotus' praise of Athens as the savior of Greece at 7.139 (quoted above). His language there is emphatic, and by calling Athens "savior" and saying that she "held the scales" in the war, he ascribes to the city characteristics that are normally applied only to gods. Even more, at the beginning of the paragraph, he draws attention to what he is doing:

> And here I am forced to state an opinion which most men will dislike but since, to me at least, it seems to be true, I shall not refrain.

This certainly seems to cast Herodotus in the role of defender and panegyrist of Athens, but it is not so simple. In the first place, Herodotus' view of the importance of Athens in 480 B.C. is almost certainly correct, and it would be a strange sort of criticism to make the historian into a partisan pamphleteer because he told the truth. And in the second place, the way he draws attention to his judgment is two-edged: by saying that the opinion of Athens' importance will be unpopular, he reminds his readers that the Athenian actions since that time have not entirely lived up to their greatness in the Persian Wars.

Other allusions to Athenian actions seem less than wholeheartedly complimentary. In the one clear reference to Pericles in the *Histories*, Herodotus tells the story of Agarista, the granddaughter of Cleisthenes, the Athenian legislator:

> She, married to Xanthippus son of Ariphron, and being pregnant, saw a vision in her sleep: she thought that she gave birth to a lion, and a few days afterwards, she bore Xanthippus a son, Pericles.
>
> (6.131)

To compare the great Athenian leader to a lion cub may seem, at first sight, wholly flattering; but to those who recall Herodotus' description (3.108, cited above) of the devastation that producing a lion wreaks on its mother or remember Aeschylus' simile of the lion cub in the *Agamemnon*, it is a less than cheerful image.

Xanthippus appears again in Herodotus, in the very last episode of the *Histories* (9.116 ff.). After the Athenians had captured Sestos and before they sailed home with the cables of Xerxes' bridge over the Hellespont, they captured and punished the Persian commander of the district, one Artayctes. This man had, by tricking Xerxes, plundered the treasures of the shrine of Protesilaus. While he was in captivity, Artayctes saw the salted fish being cooked by his Athenian guard start to leap in the pan as if newly caught; recognizing this as an omen that Protesilaus, though dead and preserved, still had the power to punish a malefactor, Artayctes tried to bribe Xanthippus, the Athenian commander, to release him and his son. That the incorruptible Xanthippus refused the bribe may appear to be complimentary either to the Athenians in general or to Pericles, but the sequel does not. Xanthippus led Artayctes to the place where Xerxes' bridge had been fixed, and there had him nailed to a board and left him to hang, while his son was stoned to death before his eyes.

Parallels in the *Histories* suggest that this act is not merely a sign of proper severity. We are reminded not only of the "excessively cruel" punishment inflicted by Pheretima on her enemies in book 4, but of an even closer parallel in book 9. After the battle of Plataea, an Aeginetan had suggested to the Spartan general Pausanias that he should discourage future Persian outrages against the Greeks by beheading and crucifying their general Mardonius, an act that Herodotus describes as "most sacrilegious." Pausanias rejected the advice:

> That deed suits barbarians rather than Greeks; and even in them we dislike it. I myself would not wish to please either the Aeginetans or anyone else who enjoys such acts; it is enough for me if I please the Spartans, by righteous deeds and by righteous speech.
>
> (9.79)

Pausanias' speech and the nobility that he later shows in refusing to hold guilty the children of a Theban, Medizer, whose father had escaped are meant to show a noble, properly Greek way to behave, and the difference between what he does and what Xanthippus does is striking: what Pausanias condemns as barbarian and impious, Xanthippus carries out. This juxtaposition may be intended merely to reflect on the character of the two men, but another conclusion is possible. In the interval between the incidents, the Peloponnesian forces had decided that the war was over and had gone home, leaving the Athenians to besiege Sestos. It was the Athenians alone, and not the Greeks as a whole, who were responsible for the unpleasantly barbaric execution of Artayctes and his son.

However one wishes to interpret stories such as these, it is clear that Herodotus was well aware that the history of the Greek struggle against the Persians was the occasion for some deeds that were less than entirely honorable. That he was conscious of the actions that took place after 479 B.C., moreover, is clear not only from allusions to specific events of the succeeding fifty years but from certain passages that seem to suggest that the glory of the war with Xerxes was somewhat overshadowed by the sequel. Perhaps chief among these events is an incident that occurs at the very beginning of the Persian Wars proper, when the Persian fleet had just set sail from Delos to Eretria in 490. Immediately after their departure from the sacred island, it was struck by an earthquake, the first and last ever to affect it:

> And this was a portent, as I suppose, by which the god revealed to men the evils that were to come. For in the generations of Darius the son of Hystaspes and Xerxes the son of Darius and Artaxerxes the son of Xerxes, in these three successive generations more ills fell upon Greece than in the twenty generations before Xerxes, evils coming in part from the Persians, but in part from the wars for the supreme power fought by their own leaders.
>
> (6.98)

That Herodotus should report a significant omen is scarcely surprising, but the weight, solemnity, and emphasis that he gives it is striking. By saying that the earthquake was a portent of all the ills to affect Greece from both external and internal warfare for three generations, Herodotus seems for a moment to extend his subject and to undercut the glorious deeds of the Persian Wars that he is about to relate by this somber glance at the future.

The impressiveness of Herodotus' utterance here and the impression that it must have made on contemporary readers are the result not only of the formal use of patronymics to reintroduce the Persian kings, but of the chronological indications that he gives. Twenty generations before the accession of Darius, at Herodotus' normal equivalence of three generations to the century, is 1189 B.C., the period of the Trojan War. In this figure, then, Herodotus includes the entire span of time encompassed by his work, and at the same time refers to the previous great conflict between East and West that he had excluded from his subject in the preface of the *Histories*. As for the generations of the Persian kings, that period could conceivably include the years down to 424 B.C., when Artaxerxes died. As Herodotus himself was probably dead by then, however, we may take it to refer to the time until the sentence was itself written.

There are other passages of the *Histories* that show that Herodotus was not an admirer of war. One thinks in particular of Croesus' admission of the folly of attacking Cyrus:

> No one is so foolish as to prefer war to peace; for in peace sons bury their fathers, but in war fathers bury their sons.
>
> (1.87)

But one passage in particular seems to show Herodotus' horror at the war that developed between the Greek cities after the Persian Wars, the "war for supreme power," as he called it in 6.98. At the beginning of book 8, just before the battle of Salamis, Herodotus explains why the Athenians did not supply the

commander in chief for the Greek fleet:

> From the start . . . there had been talk of turning over the command at sea to the Athenians. But when the allies opposed this, the Athenians yielded, considering the survival of Greece to be of utmost importance and recognizing that if they quarreled over the leadership, Greece would be destroyed. In this they judged correctly; for civil strife is as much worse than war waged by a unified people as war is worse than peace. Understanding this, the Athenians did not press their claim but yielded, only so long as they had great need of the others, as they showed: for when they had driven the Persian back and were contending for his territory, then, using the insolence of Pausanias as an excuse, they deprived the Lacedaemonians of their leadership.
>
> (8.3)

The phrase that Herodotus uses to describe the "civil strife" that is so much worse than war is a memorable one: *stasis emphulos*, "civil war within a race." The expression was not coined by Herodotus, but he gave it a very new meaning. Just as *stasis* by itself in Herodotus always refers to civil war within a city, so *stasis emphulos* and related expressions in earlier authors mean the same thing. The *polis* is seen as the furthest extent of common blood to be defined by *emphulos*. In 8.3, however, Herodotus means something quite different, as the choice is not between civil war in a city and war in general, but war between Greek and Greek and war between Greek and Persian. By changing the meaning of the phrase from intracity to intercity strife, Herodotus implies that all the Greek cities have the same relationship to one another as do citizens of the same town or members of the same family. All Greece, that is, should be recognized as a single unit, of which the individual cities are members.

The context of Herodotus' use of the phrase in 8.3, however, makes it all too clear that it is only in his view, not in that of the Greek cities, that they are all related. As he tells the story of the Athenians' decision not to press for the leadership in 480 B.C., it emerges that they did so not because they believed in Greek unity, but because they needed help from the other Greeks for their own survival, and that they abandoned that pose as soon as it was safe to do so. This contrasts markedly with their words at the end of book 8, when they reproach the Spartans for believing that they would betray Greece to the Persians:

> Your fear is base, knowing full well as you do that the Athenian spirit is such that there is nowhere on earth so much gold or a land so outstanding in beauty or excellence that, accepting such gifts, we would want to join with the Persians and enslave Greece. Many and great are the obstacles to this, even if we should desire it: first and most important, the burning and destruction of the images and temples of the gods, whom we are forced to avenge to the best of our capacities rather than come to terms with their destroyers; next, there is the kinship of the Greeks in race and speech, and the shrines of the gods and the sacrifices which we have in common, and the way of life which we all share. For the Athenians to betray all this would not be right.
>
> (8.144)

Despite the pious assertions of the Athenians here, it was obvious to any contemporary reader of Herodotus that they had not chosen to honor the "kinship of the Greeks"; and the events of the fifty years following the Persian Wars show that a speech that Herodotus gave to Mardonius, the Persian general, was all too accurate. After saying that the Greeks had seemed very reluctant to fight him in 490, all but the Athenians, Mardonius went on:

> But, as I have learned, the Greeks are accustomed to start wars very irrationally, on account of their arrogance and clumsiness. . . . Since they all speak the same language, they ought to use heralds and messengers and any means other than fighting to compose their differences. . . .
>
> (7.9)

Clearly Herodotus has here put a view that is his own into the mouth of a Persian general.

If one considers the notorious disunity of the Greeks in Herodotus' day, it may seem odd that

he speaks of them as if they were all brothers. But perhaps we should consider the possibility that that is precisely the point that Herodotus wished to make. Indeed, considering the history of Greece before the Persian Wars, as told by Herodotus, together with the events of his lifetime, it seems likely that the forging of that unity during the Persian Wars was one of the "marvellous achievements" that he announces as his topic in the preface.

The unity of the Panhellenic experiment at Thurii quickly collapsed; the cooperation of the Greek cities in the Persian Wars took slightly longer to degenerate into internecine strife. But the participant in the former event is not likely to have been unaffected by the latter. By writing a history that showed how the forging of unity between the most narrow-minded, selfish, and touchy cities (and the *Histories* amply document those characteristics) led, for once, to a victory over the greatest empire in the world, he surely had his own time in mind. Thucydides may have obliquely sneered at his predecessor's work by calling it "a prize essay for the moment," but that description can have a more honorable meaning than its author intended. Herodotus' work was aimed at the immediate readers; his goal was no less than to resurrect in their minds the nation of Greece that had defeated the Persians and that was, through the pettiness and self-interest of their descendants, in danger of becoming "without renown" and "effaced."

Even if Herodotus succeeded in restoring the unity of Greece in the minds of his readers, he was not successful in having any effect on the Greeks themselves. The union of Greece was not to be seen again for many generations, and when it came, it was imposed from without. Herodotus' *Histories* do not express a tragic vision of human life, but they bring to mind the true tragedy of Greece as well as the triumphant moment that the historian recorded.

"Blessed is the man," said Euripides in a famous fragment (910) from an unknown play, "who has knowledge that comes from *historia*. He does not devise calamities for the citizens or commit injustice, but observes the ageless order of immortal nature, in what way it came to be and whence and how. Never can the practice of base deeds cleave to such men." There is much in the *Histories* that enables us to apply Euripides' accolade to Herodotus—the ultimately benign picture of a wise and provident divine power, the sense of wonder at man's energy and achievements, the countless rewards that await the determined seeker after the causes of things. But Euripides' understanding of *historia* pertains only to natural philosophers, to researchers who explained what was above and below the earth, who looked at the cosmos and not at cities, who studied strife among the elements and not wars among men. To the degree that Herodotus' researches led him to similarly detached and grand visions of a beautifully balanced universal order, a divinely protected equilibrium of natural and human forces, so far can he be called blessed. When men's deeds merit epic commemoration, when the historian can freely confer the appropriate glory upon them, then he too can be called fortunate. But it is the prerogative of the natural philosopher alone to isolate himself from sad decline and from abysmal repetitions of wasted spirit in an expense of shame. Herodotus' broader understanding of *historia* made such isolation impossible, and a story that he tells (9.16) may serve as a suitable epigraph for his life's work. At a banquet in Thebes before the battle of Plataea, a leading Persian sat next to the Orchomenian Thersander and spoke in distress of the many deaths that lay in store for the Persians in the battle. He went on to say that, though he knew a disaster was coming, he was powerless to avert it:

> Indeed this is the most hateful of sorrows among men, to have much knowledge and yet power over nothing.

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