

## REVIEW DISCUSSION

### Herodotus and Mesopotamia: A Fresh Start?

DEWALD, Carolyn, and Rosaria Vignolo MUNSON. 2022. *Herodotus: Histories Book 1*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. £99.99. 9780521871730.

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Famously, Herodotus did not include in his *Histories* a full treatment of Mesopotamia — which he called ‘Assyria’ — despite writing twice that he would (1.106 and 1.184). Some have held that Aristotle had access to the complete ‘Assyrian *logoi*’,<sup>1</sup> but we certainly do not. Explaining what Herodotus had to say about Mesopotamia therefore poses a twofold challenge: to deal with this ellipsis, and to make sense of what he did say in light of the considerable textual and archaeological record that has been recovered over the course of the past 200 years. Ever since the decipherment of cuneiform and the development of scientific archaeology, it has been a matter of much debate whether Herodotus actually visited Babylon, which he describes in some detail but with many inaccuracies. The current consensus, based on the textual and archaeological record and largely reflected by the authors’ commentary, is that he did not, because his descriptions, not only of social institutions and beliefs that are prone to misinterpretation, but even of physical realities such as buildings, are highly imaginative despite containing morsels of fact.

In their introduction, the authors first provide a summary of Mesopotamian history, largely informed by a classic monograph and a sourcebook by Amélie Kuhrt.<sup>2</sup> This is useful information for the book’s target audience of aspiring scholars of Greek and Latin, who, even in this day and age, are likely to have heard precious little in their undergraduate and graduate curriculum about other ancient civilizations. The authors follow this up with a rather confusingly titled section on ‘Greek Accounts of Assyrian or Babylonian History’, which does not, as one might expect, attempt to give an overview of how Greek authors other than Herodotus represented Mesopotamian history, but seemingly intends to contrast Herodotus’ account either with the fragments of Ctesias of Cnidus’ nearly contemporary *Persika*, or with modern historical knowledge. This introduces one of the main questions about Herodotus on Mesopotamia, i.e. the reliability of his assertions. The authors conclude with a section on ‘Assyro-Babylonian Ethnography’, which collects the relevant references in Herodotus; this section introduces another important question, i.e. what do Herodotus’ statements regarding Babylon reveal about his own world-view.

In 1.177–200, Herodotus recounts the Persian king Cyrus’ conquest of Babylon in 539 BCE. Most of this narration consists of a description of the city of Babylon (177–187) and a brief geographical and ethnographical report on the region of Babylonia (192–200), which are separated by the story of Cyrus’

<sup>1</sup> See Huxley 1965.

<sup>2</sup> Kuhrt 1995, 2007.

conquest proper (188–191). The authors provide a very helpful and informative commentary, covering aspects of language, history and literary analysis, thus making Herodotus' report more easily accessible not only to students of Greek and Latin, but also to Assyriologists and ancient Near Eastern archaeologists — although in this regard it is a pity that the Cambridge 'green and yellow' series does not include a translation. Readers of cuneiform literature may wonder at certain approximations: for instance, why call the Royal canal joining the Euphrates and the Tigris by its later Aramaic name *nahar-malka* (450) instead of using the Babylonian form *nār šarri*, which is also attested in Ptolemy's *Geography* (5.20)? Nevertheless, the commentary reflects the increasing scholarly interest for the dynamics of cultural interaction between the Greeks and the Ancient Near East.

It is not the authors' purpose to study in detail the matter of Herodotus' reliability as a source on ancient Mesopotamia, but they discuss it occasionally, and they also provide the essential bibliography on the matter at 178.1n (425), although they leave out the important paper by Henkelman et al.,<sup>3</sup> which is used elsewhere in the commentary. The authors seem inclined to believe that Herodotus did visit Babylonia, and at least once they seem to accept the implication from his text that he visited Babylon itself (6). That is a far-reaching assumption that this reviewer believes should have been examined more carefully in the commentary, as it is decisive for how we read the entire passage.

Herodotus never explicitly claims that he visited Babylonia. Two passages are often adduced to support that he did. First, in his description of the Euphrates (1.185), he makes a reference to the present (*vūn*, 'now') effects of past canalization. As the authors remark (1.185.2 n. 438), 'although this supplies the validation of H.'s own day, it is still not quite explicit autopsy'. Secondly, Herodotus writes that the size of Babylonian crops meets with disbelief from 'those who have never been to Babylonia' (1.193: τοῖσι μὴ ἀπιγμένοισι ἐς τὴν Βαβυλωνίην). As the authors claim (1.193.4 n. 451–2), this does imply that he went to Babylonia, if not to the city of Babylon itself; but the implication need not be true, and could just as well be a clever ploy to make his audience believe that his report was based on autoptic knowledge, without needing to lie about it.

Earlier on, Herodotus might seem to be using a similar device when he writes that the walls of Babylon are built unlike those of any other city 'of which we know' (1.178.2: τῶν ἡμεῖς ἴδμεν), suggesting in a way that he has been to Babylon, although scholars generally agree that he has not; yet in fact, as pointed out by the authors' commentary on the first occurrence of this phrase (1.6.2 n. 195), there is evidence that in general Herodotus uses it 'for emphasis but also to signal his reluctance to claim definitive knowledge' — they add that 'the first-person plural ἴδμεν (= Att. ἴσμεν) refers to a collective tradition or general knowledge shared by Greeks'. And again, as noted by the authors, when Herodotus writes that the temple of Zeus Belos (presumably the Etemenanki) still existed in his day (ἐς ἐμὲ ἔτι τοῦτο ἔὸν), this is 'not quite an indication of autopsy' (1.181.2 n. 430).

<sup>3</sup> Henkelman, Kuhrt, Rollinger and Wiesehöfer 2011.

Even the act of pointing out that he did not see (1.183.3: ἐγὼ μὲν μιν οὐκ εἶδον, ‘I myself have not seen it’) the other temple he describes (presumably the Esangil), seems like a subterfuge, as it implies by contrast that he saw everything else.

Thus, we have no positive evidence that Herodotus ever set foot in Mesopotamia. By contrast, he made it abundantly clear that he had gone to Egypt (2.2; 2.29; and throughout), and he also stated explicitly that he had been in Tyre (2.44). If he had travelled as far as Babylon, it would have enhanced his authorial persona to say so explicitly, instead of leaving room for doubt, and for this reason we must be wary of the assumption that he is speaking from autopsy. Twice he mentions the ‘Chaldeans’ as his sources (1.181.5 and 1.183.1), and the authors rightly note that he ‘never specifies who they were or how he encountered them’, and go on to speculate that ‘they may have acted as guides either for H. himself or for his informants’ (1.183.1 n. 433). Yet another possibility, since the term Χαλδαῖος, here as elsewhere, need not be taken as an ethnic (1.181.5 n. 432), is that they were encountered not in Babylonia but somewhere else.

Without assuming that Herodotus ever set foot in Mesopotamia, can we explain how he came to know what he knew, and how he came up with the rest? How does not making this assumption affect our understanding of what he was trying to accomplish with this brief section of the *Histories*? And did his lack of autopsy make him give up on writing a comprehensive history and ethnography of Mesopotamia after all? These are long-standing questions that no one expects to be settled in a book of this scope, but they deserve to be introduced without making unwarranted assumptions.<sup>4</sup> Babylon must have been something of a household name on the Greek mainland, since Aristophanes parodied precisely this part of Herodotus’ *Histories* in his *Birds*.<sup>5</sup> Yet evidence has accrued of sustained cultural interactions between Greek and Mesopotamian intellectuals before, during and after Herodotus’ time. To explain what Herodotus was trying to do when he wrote about Babylon and Babylonia, the authors might, for example, have drawn upon Haubold’s innovative study of Herodotus’ Babylonian narrative as part of a dialogue with other Near Eastern and Greek stories about the succession of empires.<sup>6</sup> Whether or not one agrees with Haubold’s claim that Herodotus is reflecting a tradition of Babylonian exceptionalism, but rewriting it by stripping Babylon of its historical agency, searching cuneiform literature for shared themes, ideas and literary forms is certainly a fruitful way to advance our understanding of Herodotus and his intellectual context. This in turn may shed new light on the connected histories of the ancient Mediterranean and the Ancient Near East.

While some of their far-reaching claims, such as those discussed above, may not stand up to careful scrutiny, and, however traditional, could have been more clearly flagged as interpretation rather than fact, the authors should be commended for their contribution to the study of Herodotus and Babylon.

<sup>4</sup> As far as I am aware, the latest paper to deal with these matters is Pruša 2023.

<sup>5</sup> See Nesselrath 2014.

<sup>6</sup> Haubold 2013: 74–98.

Their book will make it much easier for students and scholars of every stripe to start thinking about these matters afresh, provided they are willing to read from the Greek.

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