REVIEW DISCUSSION

Herodotus on the Limits of Knowledge and Authority

KINGSLEY, K. Scarlett. 2024. *Herodotus and the Presocratics: Inquiry and Intellectual Culture in the Fifth Century BCE*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. £85.00. 9781009338547.

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Herodotus may well have been the father of history; he was certainly a child of his time – as, indeed, we all are. He belongs fully to the intellectual world of the fifth century BC – a world marked by an increasingly acute tension between deeply rooted beliefs on the one hand and, on the other, the challenges posed by emerging forms of knowledge. Generally speaking, it would be a mistake to divide the intellectuals of this period into champions of innovation and those singing the praise of a bygone golden age: in nearly all of them one finds an intriguing mixture of old and new elements, articulated in ever-changing ways. This holds for Herodotus as well, who certainly did not live in an intellectual vacuum, as is brilliantly shown by Scarlett Kingsley in *Herodotus and the Presocratics*.[1]

One example of these dynamics is the problem of knowledge. The notion of an authority legitimized by divine inspiration was, by the fifth century, a model in crisis.[2] The question, however, was who could now lay claim to the role of a new epistemic authority (and on what grounds). This is one of the most hotly debated issues among the so-called Presocratic thinkers. As Kingsley very clearly and thoroughly shows, Herodotus repeatedly returns to reflect on this same theme. His approach is not linear: while certain passages contain very assertive truth claims (217–20), elsewhere Herodotus appears far more cautious and reserved. The former case is perhaps the more interesting – or at least that less often considered by scholars – insofar as it allows us to draw a parallel between Herodotus and Parmenides (179–86). This is one of the most intriguing aspects of Kingsley's analysis. Surprising though it may seem, Herodotus appears to adopt terms and insights clearly traceable to Parmenides and to his claim to possess a rigorous understanding of reality. Perhaps the most significant parallel is Herodotus' use of the verb *einai* ('to be') in a truth-telling sense. Kingsley counts 14 occurrences: 'he makes use of this veridical sense more than any other extant author' (182 n. 56). No less significant is the use of the metaphor of the journey of knowledge at Hdt. 1.95.1 (ἐπιδίζηται, cf. διζήσεαι at 28 B8.6 DK), a programmatic and crucial passage, almost 'a second proem' (184; notably, *einai* recurs here as well in a veridical sense).[3] What in Parmenides applies to very general matters applies, in the case of

[1] See also the seminal Thomas 2000.

[2] Sassi 2020: 202–50 is a very useful and complete guide into this topic.

[3] Hdt. 1.95.1: 'From here on out our narrative goes on to inquire (ἐπιδίζηται ... ὁ λόγος) into Cyrus, who he was who destroyed the empire of Croesus, and into the Persians, in what manner they ruled over Asia. I will write in accordance with these things what some of the Persians relate,

Herodotus, to much more specific points (within the realm of human affairs, which held no value for Parmenides).[4] Yet the certainty of the claim is the same.

This certainty, however – and here we come to the second horn of the dilemma – collides with numerous other passages in which Herodotus presents himself as more cautious and reticent. The issue does not only concern, as is inevitable, specific cases in which it is difficult to ascertain how things truly happened. Herodotus reveals an awareness of the difficulties involved in attaining certain knowledge even in more general terms.[5] These are evidently two different stances, which risk proving incompatible.[6] How should this opposition be evaluated? Is it possible to reconcile it within a more coherent framework?

One possible reconciliation could be achieved by taking better account of Herodotus' relationship with Parmenides. He does indeed adopt many of Parmenides' terms, together with truth claims similar to those of the Presocratic thinker. One difference, however, must be emphasized. The strength of Parmenides' argument (which also finds an eloquent parallel in Heraclitus) lies in the objectification, so to speak, of his claim to truth: what renders his reasoning irrefutable is its objective rather than subjective character. It is not Parmenides himself who speaks, but rather truth itself speaking through Parmenides. Fundamentally, this is the same structure one finds in archaic poetry, only with a new source of truth: the authority that guarantees the truthfulness of discourse is no longer a mythical divinity but rational argument. Yet it is still an external source.

In Herodotus, by contrast, the subjective presence of an 'I' standing at the centre of the stage remains consistently pronounced. Herodotus is not the mere conduit of truth; instead, he insists that it is *he* who takes a stance. Even more significantly, this subjective claim does not purport to possess infallible knowledge: Herodotus moves between the extremes the assertion of his knowledge and the acknowledgement of his own ignorance.

The assertion of one's epistemic authority is widespread among philosophers, poets and other writers.[7] What renders Herodotus' stance distinctive is precisely his acknowledgement of his own limitations. This is a rarer phenomenon, though not unique. From this perspective, it is illuminating to compare him with a contemporary thinker who has often been associated with Herodotus but receives little attention in Kingsley's book – namely, Protagoras.[8] One of the defining

those not willing to exalt the circumstances surrounding Cyrus, but who wish to tell the true story (τὸν ἐόντα λέγειν λόγον), although I know (ἐπιστάμενος) three other paths of stories to disclose.'

[4] Kingsley writes: 'Given the association of τὸ ἐόν with a philosophical register, an innovation of the *Histories* is its applying it to the speech of a mortal philosopher, rather than a divinity as in Parmenides' (183).

[5] Cf., e.g., 1.49.1, 2.56.1, 2.156.2, 3.23.3, 4.16.1, 6.82.1, 6.123.3, 9.81.2 and *passim* with Kingsley 186–9. See also Apfel 2011: 168–72.

[6] Criticism of Herodotus for this inconsistency is not uncommon among scholars, cf., e.g., Lateiner 1989: 57; Moles 1993: 95.

[7] See Hecataeus *FGrHist* 1 F and the Hippocratic authors, just to mention two important references for Herodotus. Cf. Sassi 2020: 244.

[8] The parallel with Xenophanes is also interesting, see Kingsley 170–1 and 176–7. In more general terms, Kingsley is right when she observes that the issue of 'the access to truth was of serious philosophical interest' (174).

aspects of Protagoras' 'man-measure' thesis[9] in fact concerns the difficulty – or rather, the impossibility – of attaining unequivocal and incontrovertible results. This is because knowledge is always subjectively mediated. As Jaap Mansfeld has demonstrated in a seminal article,[10] the true measure is personal experience: every cognition always expresses a specific relation between the knowing subject and the object known. In other words, knowledge – and with it, the possibility of truth – fractures into as many parts as there are knowing subjects.

Yet if we consider the surviving fragments of Protagoras, we can observe that this insight does not lead to scepticism. On the contrary, the awareness of the difficulty of attaining correct knowledge of reality constitutes the first step of a more articulated process, one which also involves analysing what can be known and what lies beyond our capacity (as in the case, for example, of the gods),[11] and which culminates in the ability to identify and propose concrete answers or solutions. It is this cluster of abilities that establishes the superiority of the sophist – that is, of Protagoras. These are three closely interrelated capacities: the ability to confront the complexity of reality by recognizing its profoundly ambiguous character; the ability to determine what can be the object of inquiry and what falls beyond our reach; and the ability to find concrete solutions or answers where this is possible. In this sense, thanks to these capacities, the sophist Protagoras may present himself as the new teacher the city needs.

Despite certain differences, Herodotus' position displays significant convergences with that of Protagoras. To be sure, Herodotus pursues more theoretical goals: his objective is not to propose concrete, practical solutions to the city but to reconstruct past events as accurately as possible. On this point, Herodotus and Protagoras diverge. But in terms of awareness and method, the parallels are worth mentioning. Herodotus, no less than Protagoras, presupposes what Carolyn Dewald has called 'the polyvocalism of the world'.[12] Like Protagoras, Herodotus is aware that knowledge of the world is difficult to attain because the world is intrinsically plural. And unlike the epistemic authority claimed by many other so-called 'experts', that of Herodotus and Protagoras does not emerge in opposition to falsehood, but rather within a plural context (which, in Herodotus' case, also takes the form of the problem of evaluating sources): it depends on their ability to navigate among different perspectives in an ambiguous world, identifying the best – or, better, the most correct – solution or answer.[13] As Kingsley

[9] Protagoras 80 B1 DK: 'of all things the measure is man: of those that are, that they are; and of those that are not, that they are not'. For an interpretation of this fragment, and more in general on Protagoras' epistemology, I refer the reader to Bonazzi 2020: 13–26; Bonazzi 2024 § 2.

[10] Mansfeld 1981.

[11] See Protagoras 80 B4 DK. It is worth noting the proximity between Protagoras and Herodotus on this specific point (cf. Hdt. 2.3.2 and 2.53.1); see Thomas 2000: 67; Apfel 2011: 133. This caution contrasts with the confidence of Xenophanes, who advances a reformed conception of divinity after initially expressing doubts (21 B29 DK) and criticizing traditional beliefs (21 B10–14 DK); see Mansfeld 1981: 40–1.

[12] Dewald 2002: 276. See also Apfel 2011: 178–9; Morgan 2023: 55 (stressing the difference with Hecataeus).

[13] On the importance of 'correctness' in the fifth-century intellectual world, see Thomas 2000: 229–35; Bonazzi 2020: 48–9.

aptly puts it, 'Herodotus' *Histories* is not an authoritative account of accurate reporting but an authoritative account of the difficulty of reporting' (168). And precisely for this reason, Herodotus, no less than Protagoras, can present himself before the city armed with a form of knowledge suited to the challenges of a new, demanding age.

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