
REVIEW DISCUSSION

Herodotus in 2021

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The three-volume, 1,653-page *Herodotus Encyclopedia* abundantly demonstrates that, despite all accusations to the contrary, classical scholarship is neither ideologically tainted nor intellectually moribund. On the contrary, the scholarly care, creativity and nuance on view here makes this modern historian blush. In entries covering subjects as disparate as ‘Trees’, ‘Ctesias’, ‘Metaphors’ and ‘Weeping’, written by experts ranging from ancient historians and Egyptologists to scholars of South Asian Studies and Political Science, the *Encyclopedia* offers an immense resource for students and scholars. For those dedicated enough to read extensively, it also demonstrates just how vibrant the field of Herodotus studies is today, as demonstrated, too, by the huge success of the Herodotus Helpline, the recent performance of the Herodotus Marathon and the founding of this very journal. Why so many of us are currently interested in the ‘father of history’ is a question we ought to ask, and one I will tackle, briefly, at the end of this essay.

Naturally, a review of this length cannot discuss many individual entries, and this reviewer, being a modern intellectual historian rather than a specialist in things ancient, has no business evaluating the truth content of the many essays on specific topics such as places (‘Erythrae’), minor players or peoples (‘Aeimnestus’ and ‘Satrae’), or little-known deities (‘Pleistorus’). Many of these unassuming entries were written by Baron himself, who has taken on the role of both Denis Diderot and the Chevalier de Jaucourt, the workhorse polymath who wrote perhaps 17,000 of the entries in Diderot’s Enlightened *Encyclopédie* (1751–1766). Before moving on to a discussion of some of the meatier articles, in pursuit of patterns in this vast Herodotean carpet, I want to be sure to salute Baron’s enormous industry in filling in all of this material, as well as in his ingenious selection of creatively defined subjects (‘Hair’, ‘Cross-references’, ‘Violence’), not only well chosen, but assigned to and composed by virtually all of the leading Herodotus scholars at work today.

So as not to overreach my competence, I will opt below to say something synthetic about the entries that concern several ‘big picture’ questions of historiographical interest: relations between Europe and ‘the Orient’; Herodotus’ status as a truth-teller; and the structural and ideological importance of historical (or divine) causation. Many individual entries touch on these questions in one way or another; European/Near Eastern relations arise, for example, not only in essays on ‘Hellas’, ‘Europe’, ‘Boundaries’, ‘Maps’, ‘Ethnicity’, ‘Barbarians’, ‘Panhellenism’ and ‘Orientalism’, but also in essays on ‘Xerxes’, ‘Croesus’, ‘Athens’ and so on. There are other somewhat related entries — for example, essays on ‘*Thōmata*’ (‘marvels’), ‘Monuments’ and ‘Travel’ also bear on the question of Herodotus’ historical method and the extent to which he wished to (and did) tell the truth. Although there is a fair amount of repetition of key passages in discussions of ‘Fate’, ‘Vengeance’, ‘Gods’, ‘Causation’ and ‘Religion’, each piece offers a nuanced cut through the text, providing

an invaluable list of relevant passages to explore and compare. What is striking on reading through all of these necessarily brief cuts is that on all these subjects there is a great deal of agreement: to paraphrase Anthony Ellis in his entry on 'Religion, Herodotus' Views on', such agreement is that '[i]f we attempt to assemble a single theological or religious [or ideological, or historiographical] worldview from disparate parts of the *Histories* ... the answers will inevitably be unpersuasive' (1232).

In the interests, then, of being more authoritative than argumentative, as is proper to the genre of the encyclopaedia as opposed to the scholarly book or article, our entries touching on Herodotus' 'orientalism' (or not) and Athenian patriotism (or not) are consistent in underlining the historian's ambivalence. On the one hand, he underscores the tendency of Near Eastern tyrants to be corrupted by power- or conquest-seeking; on the other, he sees the same tendencies in Greek tyrants. Herodotus details the cruelties of several 'oriental' princesses — but he also praises Semiramis and Nitocris for promoting engineering projects, and his portrayal of the power of Persian women may be less ideological than reflective of the level of his access to Persian information (Deborah Boedeker, 'Women in the *Histories*', 1551). He certainly gives Athens most credit for winning the war — but perhaps does so in the context of warning them against their own imperialist tendencies. He sees the world through a Greek lens, but mostly resists moral judgements, and is self-reflexive enough about ethnocentrism to note that the Egyptians, too, consider non-natives 'barbarians' (Hyun Jin Kim, 'Barbarians', 217). Herodotus admires the courage of the Spartan king Leonidas and the wit of the Athenian general Themistocles, but not without qualification, and the achievement of Greek unity against the foreign invader is precarious, with treason, local enmities and Persian wealth, number and bravery ever-present threats. The *Histories* juxtapose canonical passages about the Greek love of political freedom (7.135–37) with the not very heroic history of the Ionian Revolt; while recently the rise of China and the war in Ukraine may have rekindled amateur interest in such passages, our authors will readily point to others in which Herodotus is not so sure that a) the Greeks really do love freedom that much; b) democracy necessarily produces either freedom or stability; and c) that the borders of Europe and Asia will ever be coherent or fixed. A large number of entries on 'Ethnicity', 'Race', 'Climate' and even 'Constitutions' argue that Herodotus, if partial to the Greeks, and occasionally exoticizing with respect to Ethiopians or Scythians, for example, is no racist. As Margaret Miller's entry on 'Orientalism' indicates, Edward Said was right to exempt Herodotus from his paradigm.

The entries on Herodotus' historical method, and his everlastingly debated truthfulness, also underscore the slipperiness of our author. Here, too, I was able to glean a general consensus, namely that Detlev Fehling's challenge has been answered,¹ not least by specialists in Near Eastern studies. Ian Moyer, for example, in his entry on 'Egypt', notes that while Herodotus' reports are sometimes distorted or wrong, 'there are also moments in which he reports accurate observations or engages with traditions whose currency among his informants ... can be confirmed or at least judged plausible' (488). Scholarship has moved on from the dichotomy of truths/lies (or even facts/wonders) to discussions of Herodotus' tripartite

¹ Fehling 1971.

historical method (*opsis, gnōmē, historiē*; see Donald Lateiner's entry on 'Historical Method' and Charles Chiasson on 'Evidence') and of the narrative strategies the author deploys to convince, amuse, instruct or perplex his readers. Entries on the author's predecessors and/or use of sources lean in the direction of Arnaldo Momigliano's presumption of Herodotus' radical novelty and against Archibald Henry Sayce's accusations of plagiarism.² No one denies his epic tendencies, but authors see in the 'countless tales' Cicero lamented in the *Histories* (*Leg.* 1.5) much more than moralizing at work. Numerous interesting essays discuss the misuse of evidence or the misreading of signs by Herodotus' characters, often motivated by the lust for power. Perhaps, as Chiasson ('Evidence') suggests, this is meant to underline the virtues of disinterested inquiry (560). Throughout the volumes one feels the impact of Rosalind Thomas' work on medical reasoning,³ and of the last two decades of intensive work on narrative beginning with Henry Immerwahr,⁴ and expanded by Carolyn Dewald, Rosaria Munson and Emily Baragwanath, amongst others.⁵ Munson, for example, draws our attention directly to the voice of narrator in her entry on 'Metanarrative', showing in a series of brilliant examples how Herodotus deploys self-referential statements to demonstrate his mastery (or lack thereof) over knowledge of the world.

The question of the *Histories'* metanarratives also preoccupies the writers who touch on the question of Herodotus' commitment to a religious worldview, but in a somewhat different way. Here the issue boils down to one of historical causation: does Herodotus believe in fate, or in free will? Most authors follow Thomas Harrison's view that one should take Herodotus' religious commitments seriously,⁶ but that one cannot expect theological consistency from a work which mixes so many of what we now call genres and puts words in so many different mouths. Anthony Ellis agrees that it would be foolhardy to attempt to distinguish fate and divinity, but points to the function of dreams in reversing Xerxes' decision NOT to cross the Hellespont (7.5–18) as evidence for the historian's at least intermittent fatalism (572). Most of the other authors, it seems, are more inclined to underline Herodotus' interest in the force of human actions, and in individual decision-making, despite the ambient force of *nomos* ('[natural] law, custom'). 'Herodotus', Emily Baragwanath notes, 'gives a strong sense of the complex and elusive nature of human character' ('Characterization', 300); some are wise, and some are oblivious, some are pious, others are violent; culture is powerful, but not determinative (wouldn't we say the same today?). So who is to blame for the war? Reasoning from the language of the Proem, Munson helpfully notes that *aitiē* ('the reason why') is not morally neutral, but implies responsibility. Yet Herodotus' very next move is to use polyphony to show that the attribution of responsibility can be self-serving. In fact, responsibility tends to be multilateral ('Causation', 286). We might say, then, that choosing one set of causes for the fight will simply set up someone's bid for exculpation; better then to give all parties a voice, as well as their due meed of glory.

² Momigliano 1958: 2–3; Sayce 1883: xxix–xxxii.

³ Thomas 2000.

⁴ Immerwahr 1966.

⁵ Dewald 1987; Munson 2001; Baragwanath 2008.

⁶ Harrison 2000.

There are many other excellent entries here, with succinct bibliographies of great use to those interested in particulars. I would especially commend the entries on technical subjects such as ‘Papyri’, ‘Editions’, ‘Manuscripts’ and ‘Scholia’, and historiographical overviews concerning particular individuals (‘Henry Immerwahr’, ‘Josephus’, ‘John Enoch Powell’, ‘Lorenzo Valla’); Katrin Dolle’s ‘Scholarship on Herodotus, 1945–2018’ is admirably helpful and wide-ranging. As noted at the outset, the contribution of non- or semi-classicists, specialists in Persian, Egyptian and Near Eastern studies and in archaeology, anthropology and the history of science make this work exemplary of the fruitfulness of discipline-crossing. I am not sure if any other classical (or medieval or modern!) text deserves such an encyclopaedia, and this one will inevitably lose some of its authority, timeliness and interest as the decades pass. But we Herodoteans have perhaps never believed in producing possessions for all time — or, at least, in failing to see the hubris in such a claim.

Finally, a word or two about what seems to this reader the remarkable popularity of Herodotus today. Of course, as those entries on ‘Reception’ and ‘Scholarship’ demonstrate, every era, and probably every individual, has read Herodotus differently; what appeals has changed over time. Whereas the ancients liked his style (even Plutarch praises it, in the very first line of *De Herodoti malignitate*), early Christians used his Near Eastern particulars to bolster their claims with respect to the antiquity and superiority of the Jewish ideas and morals. New (and Old) World travellers in the early modern era prized his geographical and ethnographic information; Cold Wars leaned into the East/West conflict. Perhaps we love him today because he performs polyphony, or because his ethnographic ecumenism (3.38) seems much more sympathetic in a multicultural age than virtually any other ancient writer. Perhaps in an age in which grand narratives seem so compromised, his digressions and defiance of generic niceties (and universal truths) seems attractive; undoubtedly we approve of his antipathy to imperialist overreach and tyrannical aspirations, whether at home or abroad. Possibly worryingly, we are ourselves having difficulty these days in telling truths from lies. In any event, it seems to me that Herodotus has now been rescued from the fate of ‘misunderestimation’ that he suffered for so long (Lateiner, ‘Reliability’, 1226): Herodotus, and Herodotean studies, have come into their own.

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