

HERODOTUS
THE
HISTORIES



TRANSLATED BY
AUBREY DE SÉLINCOURT

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Translated and with an Introduction by
Aubrey de Sélincourt

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INTRODUCTION

HARDLY anything is known of Herodotus' life. He was born between 490 and 480 B.C. at Halicarnassus, a Dorian town in Caria, on the south-west coast of Asia Minor, spent some years of his early manhood in travelling over the greater part of the then known world – visiting Egypt as far south as Assuan, Mesopotamia, Palestine, southern Russia, and the northern fringe of the African continent – and retired in later life to Thurii in Italy, where he expanded and revised his History. Athens he knew well, and greatly admired, and there is little doubt that portions of his book were publicly recited there, as well as in other leading cities of the Greek mainland.

But in spite of this wretched little collection of facts, Herodotus is better known to us as a person than any other ancient Greek writer. Plato was the supreme prose artist of the Greeks; but to read Plato brings one into communion with his mind and spirit only; to read Herodotus invites us to walk by his side, to listen to his voice, to mark on his face the shifts of expression from grave to gay, from wonder, awe, and admiration to incredulity or amusement: it gives us the man himself as he lived amongst men, noting with unappeasable zest their infinite variety and strangeness, not without a lift of the eyebrow at their odd ways and occasional propensity for telling lies. Herodotus' prose is a mirror of personality and character.

English poetry made its first appearance already fully-formed in Chaucer; but the miracle of Chaucer is less than the miracle of Herodotus, for the English poet was heir to the long tradition of European poetry, but Herodotus the prose-writer had no predecessors. His History was a new thing. He was the first Greek, the first European, to use prose as the medium of a work of art. His mastery of the new medium is one measure of his genius.

The plan of the History is grand and simple. Herodotus announces it in his opening paragraph: it is to trace the events which brought Greece into conflict with Persia, with a full description of that memorable struggle, and within the framework of the story to record what is worth remembering in universal history – or, in other words, all the information he has been able to collect, historical, geographical, sociological, and legendary, about the whole of the known world. This immense task he accomplishes with unflinching grace and deceptive ease, never, in spite of the endless digressions which it imposes upon him, losing sight of the main purpose of his book. Thus, having described the first clash between east and west in the conquest by Lydia of the Greek cities on the eastern shore of the Aegean, he proceeds to give an account of previous events in Lydian history, leading up to the defeat of Croesus by Cyrus of Persia. The introduction of Cyrus brings him naturally to tell the story of that monarch's boyhood and upbringing, and of his subsequent conquest of the Median kingdom under Astyages. Once he is embarked upon the history of Persia, his subject broadens, and in tracing the growth of Persian power he is enabled to sketch the history and manners of the greater part of the ancient world, including Egypt, a large area of southern Russia, Arabia, Libya, and Cyrenaica. The description of these countries, the conquest of which by Persia was either intended or accomplished, increases the dramatic impact of Herodotus' main theme by awakening in the reader's imagination a lively sense of the immense power and resources of the enemy who, in his own good time, was to attempt the destruction of the Greek world.

Few could fail to read Herodotus with pleasure, but most will wish to know how much faith can be put in his truth and accuracy as a historian. This is a large subject, and can only be touched on here. For his Oriental history, Herodotus had, apart from visible evidence of buildings and monuments, two sources: certain local chronicles written in Greek, which he may have read (though his acquaintance with the 'logographers', except Hecataeus whom he slightly mentions, cannot be definitely proved), and the answers given to his own interminable and highly intelligent questions by natives of the various countries he visited. Where he gets more than

one account, he is careful to record both, or all, usually indicating which he himself prefers and leaving the reader to make his choice. The reasons for his own preference often indicate some sense of historical criticism. It is evident, however, that much of what he draws from such a source will be more in the nature of popular legend than scientific history; but we are not necessarily the losers on that account. What modern research and archaeology have revealed is precious; but hardly less precious, and perhaps more entertaining, is the direct knowledge of – say – the stories of Egypt's past which were current in the streets of Memphis in the fifth century before Christ. Herodotus' habit of including even those details of popular belief which seem to him most absurd and impossible has resulted, at any rate in one instance, in proving a most important and interesting fact – the circumnavigation by a Phoenician vessel of the African continent. The ship's company reported (he incredulously informs us) that, as they sailed west off the southern coast of the continent, they had the midday sun on their right hand.

For his Greek history, Herodotus relied on existing inscriptions and on oral testimony. The first Persian invasion of Greece took place just before he was born, the second when he was a child; he would therefore have had ample opportunity of talking with men who had witnessed, or played a part in, both of those events, before the passage of time had dimmed them or made them legendary. Oral testimony is not good evidence for a historian, but it was the best Herodotus could get, and there is no reason to suppose that his account is anything but true in its broad outline, though in matters of detail, especially where statistics are involved, it may well be suspect.

In tracing historical cause and effect Herodotus is not in advance of other ancient historians, and falls short of his successor Thucydides. The great movements of history he invariably assigns to the will or whim of persons as their immediate cause, behind which stands Destiny, the ultimate and inscrutable shaper of the lives of men. God is jealous, and therefore human grandeur cannot long endure. Herodotus' greatness lies in the mastery by which he has reduced his enormous mass of heterogeneous material to a single artistic whole of unsurpassed beauty and grace. He passes with a sure

step through the labyrinthine windings and seemingly blind alleys of his story, and always emerges gaily and triumphantly holding the thread, amused at his own excellent loquacity. I use the word loquacity with no derogatory intent; for it suggests an essential element in Herodotus' style. His book was written not for private reading, but for public recitation – the Greeks of Herodotus' day possessed no books, they heard them read at private gatherings or public festivals. Herodotus' language is, moreover, like his conception of human life and destiny, shot through and through with poetry, as was natural in an age when there was as yet no division between the scientific and the imaginative mind; and this element in his writing presents a problem to the translator. It has seemed to me that to look for a 'poetic' rendering of a poetic word would result in disaster; for to Herodotus the poetic word was also the natural and inevitable one. We, on the contrary, have in some measure specialized our vocabulary, so that to introduce a poetic word or phrase would tend to falsify for a modern English reader the total impact on the imagination of Herodotus' prose, which with its ease, fluidity, and grace, its light transitions of tone, its unaffectedness, its limpid clarity, and ever present salt of humour, is like a man talking, albeit with exquisite art, amongst a group of friends.

Herodotus was accused by the ancients of magnifying Athens at the expense of her allies for the part she played in repelling the Persian invasions; maybe he did, but one of the most remarkable things about his book in general is its large-minded impartiality and tolerance. A great traveller, he doubtless brought back (for our delight) not a few travellers' tales; but the knowledge of men he acquired in the course of his travels made him value them not by reference to a preconceived standard, but for what they were. Foreign manners awake his interest, never his antagonism. If a man, he remarks, were given the chance to choose any system of beliefs and practices in the world, he would invariably choose those of his own country as the best; for custom is all. Men differ, he implies, but let us be grateful for the difference; for in spite of it they are all dominated by the same unsearchable Fate, which even the gods themselves cannot escape. It is a primitive philosophy – but it goes deep.

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THE HISTORIES

NOTE

All footnotes in the following pages are Herodotus' own words. The men who first heard Herodotus' book read to them were doubtless ready to swallow all factual information with an avid appetite; a modern reader is apt to be teased by the insertion of bits and pieces of information which are not immediately relevant, or interrupt the narrative. It has seemed better, therefore, to relegate such passages – in most cases very brief – to footnotes, which may be read or not, according to inclination.

BOOK ONE

IN this book, the result of my inquiries into history, I hope to do two things: to preserve the memory of the past by putting on record the astonishing achievements both of our own and of the Asiatic peoples; secondly, and more particularly, to show how the two races came into conflict.

Persian historians put the responsibility for the quarrel on the Phoenicians. These people came originally from the coasts of the Indian Ocean; and as soon as they had penetrated into the Mediterranean and settled in that part of the country where they are to-day, they took to making long trading voyages. Loaded with Egyptian and Assyrian goods, they called at various places along the coast, including Argos, in those days the most important of the countries now called by the general name of Hellas.

Here in Argos they displayed their wares, and five or six days later when they were nearly sold out, it so happened that a number of women came down to the beach to see the fair. Amongst these was the king's daughter, whom Greek and Persian writers agree in calling Io, daughter of Inachus. These women were standing about near the vessel's stern, buying what they fancied, when suddenly the Phoenician sailors passed the word along and made a rush at them. The greater number got away; but Io and some others were caught and bundled aboard the ship, which cleared at once and made off for Egypt.

This, according to the Persian account (the Greeks have a different story), was how Io came to Egypt; and this was the first in a series of provocative acts.

Later on some Greeks, whose name the Persian historians fail to record – they were probably Cretans – put into the Phoenician port

of Tyre and carried off the king's daughter Europa, thus giving them tit for tat.

For the next outrage it was the Greeks again who were responsible. They sailed in an armed merchantman to Aea in Colchis on the river Phasis, and, not content with the regular business which had brought them there, they abducted the king's daughter Medea. The king sent to Greece demanding reparations and his daughter's return; but the only answer he got was that the Greeks had no intention of offering reparation, having received none themselves for the abduction of Io from Argos.

The accounts go on to say that some forty or fifty years afterwards Paris, the son of Priam, was inspired by these stories to steal a wife for himself out of Greece, being confident that he would not have to pay for the venture any more than the Greeks had done. And that was how he came to carry off Helen.

The first idea of the Greeks after the rape was to send a demand for satisfaction and for Helen's return. The demand was met by a reference to the seizure of Medea and the injustice of expecting satisfaction from people to whom they themselves had refused it, not to mention the fact that they had kept the girl.

Thus far there had been nothing worse than woman-stealing on both sides; but for what happened next the Greeks, they say, were seriously to blame; for it was the Greeks who were, in a military sense, the aggressors. Abducting young women, in their opinion, is not, indeed, a lawful act; but it is stupid after the event to make a fuss about it. The only sensible thing is to take no notice; for it is obvious that no young woman allows herself to be abducted if she does not wish to be. The Asiatics, according to the Persians, took the seizure of the women lightly enough, but not so the Greeks: the Greeks, merely on account of a girl from Sparta, raised a big army, invaded Asia and destroyed the empire of Priam. From that root sprang their belief in the perpetual enmity of the Grecian world towards them – Asia with its various foreign-speaking peoples belonging to the Persians, Europe and the Greek states being, in their opinion, quite separate and distinct from them.

Such then is the Persian story. In their view it was the capture of Troy that first made them enemies of the Greeks.

As to Io, the Phoenicians do not accept the Persians' account; they deny that they took her to Egypt by force. On the contrary, the girl while she was still in Argos went to bed with the ship's captain, found herself pregnant, and, ashamed to face her parents, sailed away voluntarily to escape exposure.

So much for what Persians and Phoenicians say; and I have no intention of passing judgement on its truth or falsity. I prefer to rely on my own knowledge, and to point out who it was in actual fact that first injured the Greeks; then I will proceed with my history, telling the story as I go along of small cities no less than of great. Most of those which were great once are small to-day; and those which in my own lifetime have grown to greatness, were small enough in the old days. It makes no odds whether the cities I shall write of are big or little – for in this world nobody remains prosperous for long.

The dominion of Croesus, son of Alyattes, a Lydian by birth, included all the peoples to the west of the river Halys, which runs northward into the Black Sea and forms the boundary between Cappadocia and Paphlagonia. He was the first foreigner so far as we know to come into direct contact with the Greeks, both in the way of conquest and alliance, forcing tribute from Ionians, Aeolians, and Asiatic Dorians, and forming a pact of friendship with the Lacedaemonians. The earlier Cimmerian attack on Ionia being a mere plundering raid and in no sense a conquest, it can safely be said that before Croesus' time all the Greeks had been free.

The sovereignty of Lydia, which had belonged to the Heraclids, passed into the family of Croesus – the Mermnadae – in the following way. Candaules, king of Sardis (the Greeks call him Myrsilus), was descended from Alcaeus, son of Heracles. His father was Myrsus, and he was the last of the Heraclids to reign at Sardis, the first being Agron, son of Ninus, grandson of Belus, and great-grandson of Alcaeus. Before the time of Agron, the reigning house had been of the family of Lydus, son of Atys: hence the name 'Lydians', the people being previously known as Maeonians. These princes turned over the management of affairs to the Heraclids, the descendants of Heracles and a slave-girl belonging to Iardanus; the Heraclids later had their power confirmed by an oracle. They reigned for twenty-

two generations, a period in all of five hundred and five years, son succeeding father right down the line to Candaules, son of Myrsus.

Now Candaules conceived a passion for his own wife, and thought she was the most beautiful woman on earth. To this fancy of his there was an unexpected sequel.

In the king's bodyguard was a fellow he particularly liked whose name was Gyges, son of Dascylus. With him Candaules not only discussed his most important business, but even used to make him listen to eulogies of his wife's beauty.

One day the king (who was doomed to a bad end) said to Gyges: 'It appears you don't believe me when I tell you how lovely my wife is. Well, a man always believes his eyes better than his ears; so do as I tell you – contrive to see her naked.'

Gyges gave a cry of horror. 'Master,' he said, 'what an improper suggestion! Do you tell me to look at the queen when she has no clothes on? No, no: "off with her skirt, off with her shame" – you know what they say of women. Let us learn from experience. Right and wrong were distinguished long ago – and I'll tell you one thing that is right: a man should mind his own business. I do not doubt that your wife is the most beautiful of women; so for goodness' sake do not ask me to behave like a criminal.'

Thus he did his utmost to decline the king's invitation, because he was afraid of what might happen if he accepted it.

The king, however, told him not to distress himself. 'There is nothing to be afraid of,' he said, 'either from me or my wife. I am not laying a trap for you; and as for her, I promise she will do you no harm. I'll manage so that she doesn't even know that you have seen her. Look: I will hide you behind the open door of our bedroom. My wife will follow me in to bed. Near the door there's a chair – she will put her clothes on it as she takes them off, one by one. You will be able to watch her with perfect ease. Then, while she's walking away from the chair towards the bed with her back to you, slip away through the door – and mind she doesn't catch you.'

Gyges, since he was unable to avoid it, consented, and when bedtime came Candaules brought him to the room. Presently the queen arrived, and Gyges watched her walk in and put her clothes on the