

# HERODOTUS

## THE HISTORIES



EDITED BY WALTER BLANCO  
AND JENNIFER TOLBERT ROBERTS

TRANSLATED BY WALTER BLANCO

A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION

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Herodotus  
THE HISTORIES

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Translated by Walter Blanco

NEW TRANSLATION

SELECTIONS

BACKGROUNDS

COMMENTARIES

*Edited by*

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# Preface

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The preparation of an edition of Herodotus has been a labor of love; but it has also been a labor, and the authors would like to thank those who have encouraged, advised, and sustained them in their work. Thanks to Charles Fornara and Lowell Edmunds for early encouragement of the translation, and to Deborah Boedeker for a thoughtful, thorough reading of the finished product. Allen Ward's and Larry Tritle's notes and comments were also a great help. Donald Lateiner was an unfailing source of advice and information throughout the project, and Walter Dubler has been a colleague, a mentor, and a friend. Steve Forman is the complete editor, and has led us through this project with patience and skill. Friends who cheered along the way have been Billy Collins, Earl Fendelman, Michael Juliar, Robert Lejeune, Luis Losada, Michael Paull, Victor Reed and Gary Schwartz. Valuable student perspectives were offered by Daniel Patanella and Diane Perera, and Otto Sonntag was indispensable in the final review of the manuscript. Special thanks are due, finally, to Ingrid Blanco, who made Herodotus—bag and baggage—a welcome guest in her home for several years.

W.B.

J.T.R.

November 1990

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# Introduction

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Many consider ancient Greece to mean ancient Athens, because of the rich legacy Athens left us in literature, philosophy, and history. A corollary view is that ancient Greece was a homogeneous society. Neither view is accurate. Ancient Greece, which the Greeks themselves called *Hellas*, was a conglomerate of fractious city-states, each with its own political system and customs. Although Greece was united by a common language, it was a language whose dialects differed markedly from one region to another, and the student of ancient Greek must learn to distinguish the dialectal differences among Homer, Pindar, Aeschylus, and Herodotus.

Herodotus lived on the eastern fringe of this varied Greek world, in the Ionian town of Halicarnassus, on the southwest of coast of Asia Minor, or modern Turkey. He lived therefore on the edges of the great Eastern empires of Persia and Egypt, as well as the borders of Greece. This was a cultural and linguistic crossroads, a situation that helps explain Herodotus' intense interest in the history of both Greece and Persia. He loved and admired Athens, but he was not an Athenian. He recognized the importance of Athens to Ionia, but rejected Ionian snobbery about ancestral Athenian hegemony over his native region. Herodotus also admired Egypt, which he considered the source of many Greek customs and accomplishments that Greeks claimed as their own. At times he seems to cite Egyptian precedence as a way of reminding Greeks that they did not invent culture and that they were, relatively speaking, historical newcomers. Herodotus also admired the power of Eastern kings like Cyrus and Darius to achieve great public works, but he perfectly understood the dangers of their ambitious and overreaching power.

He was, as he tells us, Herodotus of Halicarnassus, justly proud of an Ionian heritage of rationalism, of exploration, and of a literary tradition whose first great exemplar was Homer himself. He was born circa 480 B.C., the year of the Battle of Salamis, and it was said that he was the nephew of Panyassis, an epic poet. Whether this is true or not, the epic influence is strong in Herodotus, who, like his fellow Greeks, considered Homer and the other epic poets his historians. His own history embodies the epic intention of preserving from extinction the memory of people's great deeds and monuments. He traveled extensively throughout the ancient world: to Greece, Babylon, Egypt, Italy, Sicily, and elsewhere. It is not known why he traveled so widely, although some speculate that he was a shipping merchant and that this explains his interest in the

depth and navigability of rivers. If he did travel for commercial reasons, he improved on this purpose to conduct historical research. And he undertook some of his excursions primarily for research. He tells us in book 2 of his *Histories*, for example, that he traveled to the Phoenician city of Tyre specifically to see a temple sacred to Heracles. In this sense, Herodotus was a historian, and not just a traveler who took an interest in the odd tales he heard from interpreters, priests, tour guides, and the person in the street.

Herodotus believed in the importance of seeing things for oneself. Whenever possible, he visited temples, battlefields, monuments, and cities, and conducted research into their history. When he could not see things for himself, he questioned the best sources available to him, and reported conflicting information given from different points of view. Although critics since antiquity have ridiculed Herodotus as a mere reteller of tales and fables, he was intensely concerned with what we can know with certainty. In his *Histories* he confidently offers descriptions and conclusions when he can draw on his own experience. In the absence of direct experience, though, when Herodotus considers anything possible, he lists almost every story he has ever heard about the subject of his inquiry—from a land in which the sky is filled with feathers, to a country of pygmies, from cattle with two sets of genitals to societies ruled by women. Herodotus' tales are delightful, and we are often amused by the naïveté of a historian capable of including so many absurdities in his universal history. Yet to Herodotus, who constantly hedges these descriptions with caveats like “people say, but I don't believe it,” or “as the story goes,” or “as legend would have it,” such stories are plausible because he does not know for sure, has not seen for himself, and therefore must rely on hearsay. What seems most fabulous, most unbelievable in the *Histories* is there precisely because Herodotus was a careful, exhaustive historian who lived at a time when facts were deeply embedded in a matrix of mythology. Readers of this book will become familiar with the question of whether Herodotus was the father of history or the father of lies. He was certainly not the latter, and though we may justly think of him as the father of history, he would probably have preferred to be known as the father of research.

Herodotus' history is the first continuous prose narrative extant in Western literature. If the narrative sometimes seems confused, haphazard, digressive, and excessively garrulous, we must remember that Herodotus was inventing the form—inventing history itself—and feeling his way as he went along. He knows that whatever you have to say in a history, there is always something else you have to say first. Before he can relate the history of Croesus, for example, he must first tell the stories of Candaules, Gyges, and Alyattes, with digressions about Periander and Arion along the way. Also, Herodotus came from an oral tradition. He is known to have given recitations of his history at Athens and elsewhere, and his style often shows the marks of transcribed speech. But though

much in Herodotus seems miscellaneous, there is a central story, and that is the story of the clash between the Eastern empire of Persia and the Western association, led by Sparta and Athens, of the mutually hostile city-states we now call Greece. In spite of all his digressions, Herodotus purposefully moves to a description of that clash, which he sees as a conflict between a despotic monarchy ruled by a magnificent autocrat whose aim is the enslavement of the whole world, and a jury-rigged confederation of states determined to remain free.

From start to finish, Herodotus' history embodies a moral: those who *overreach or attempt to vie with the gods* are doomed. The gods are jealous and strike us down at the height of our glory, and no one can be considered happy until after his death. The history is filled with warning voices: Croesus warning Cyrus, Demaratus and Artemisia warning Xerxes, Tomyris warning Darius—all repeating in one way or another the central message that *excessive ambition is a sure road to destruction*.

It has been said that all history, no matter how remote the subject, is really contemporary history. In writing about the past, one also writes about one's own, deeply felt present. After the surprising victory of the Greeks—led by Sparta and Athens—over the Persians, Athens became the preeminent state in the Greek world. Sparta had no interest in participating in a counterattack against Persia and allowed Athens to assume the leadership of a new maritime confederacy—the Delian League—composed largely of coastal states located near Persian territory. Athens then became the leader of “the free world” of the fifth century B.C. and over time met increasing criticism for abuse of that leadership. Athens was beginning to exhibit disturbing signs of the same bullying expansionism that Herodotus had seen in the reigns of Croesus, Darius, and Xerxes, and it is possible that Herodotus wrote his history as a warning to Athens against the arrogance that had led to disaster for Persia.

Quite apart from the historical importance of the narrative or the moral of the tale, Herodotus' history still speaks to us through the wonderful variety and appeal of its stories, the charm of its literary style, its author's open-mindedness and incessantly intelligent curiosity. These qualities make Herodotus' text what the ancients thought great literary works should be: sources of instruction and delight.

Walter Blanco

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# Chronology of Events

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ca. 1185 B.C.?	Trojan War?
776?	traditional date of first Olympic Games, basis of Greek dating system
753?	traditional date of founding of Rome, basis of Roman dating system
ca. 680	Gyges murders and overthrows Candaules, becomes first known tyrant, establishes dynasty of Mermnadae in Lydia
ca. 650	Cypselus becomes tyrant of Corinth
ca. 625	Cypselus is succeeded by Periander
ca. 610	Thrasybulus is tyrant at Miletus
	Greeks settle Naucratis, in Nile Delta
594 or 592	reforms of Solon at Athens
ca. 561	Pisistratus becomes tyrant at Athens
ca. 560	Croesus becomes king of Lydia
546	Cyrus defeats Croesus, annexes Lydia
ca. 528	death of Pisistratus
525	Cambyses annexes Egypt
ca. 522	death of Polycrates of Samos
	Darius becomes king of Persia
514	assassination of Hipparchus by Harmodius and Aristogeiton
ca. 512	Darius' expedition against Scythia
510	Cleomenes of Sparta aids Athenians in expelling last ruling Pisistratid (Hippias)
507	reforms of Cleisthenes
499	Ionian revolt begins
ca. 498	burning of Sardis
ca. 494	Ionians are defeated at Battle of Lade
	Persians capture Miletus
	Phrynichus is fined at Athens for presenting tragedy on fall of Miletus
492	Persian fleet is shipwrecked off Mount Athos
490	Darius invades Greece
	Eretria is destroyed
September 490	Athenian victory over Persians at Marathon



- 489 Miltiades' unsuccessful expedition to Paros  
trial and death of Miltiades
- 487 first attested ostracism at Athens
- ca. 487 fighting between Athens and Aegina
- 486 death of Darius, accession of Xerxes
- 483 fresh vein of silver discovered in Laurium mines of  
Attica  
Themistocles persuades Athenians to build navy
- 482 ostracism of Aristides
- 481 Xerxes at Sardis  
Greek congress at the Isthmus
- ca. 480 birth of Herodotus
- 480 Xerxes invades Greece
- August 480 Battle of Artemisium
- August 480 Battle of Thermopylae
- September 480 Battle of Salamis  
Xerxes withdraws from Greece, leaving Mardonius in  
command
- 479 Mardonius defeated at Plataea
- 478 Athenians begin to fortify city  
Pausanias alienates Byzantines  
foundation of Delian League and assessment by Aris-  
tides of tribute owed by each state
- 472 Aeschylus' *Persians* is produced
- ca. 471 ostracism of Themistocles
- 467 Cimon defeats Persians in Asia at Battle of Euryme-  
don
- 462 democratic reforms at Athens
- 461 ostracism of Cimon
- 460 so-called First Peloponnesian War begins
- 454 Athens is defeated in Egypt  
treasury of Delian League is removed to Athens
- ca. 452 death of Themistocles
- 449 death of Cimon  
possible treaty between Athens and Persia
- 447 Athens is defeated at Battle of Coronea, loses control  
of Boeotia  
construction is begun on Parthenon
- ca. 447 Herodotus moves to Athens
- 446 Athens and Sparta sign Thirty Years' Peace
- 443 foundation of Thurii  
Herodotus moves to Thurii
- 431 outbreak of (second) Peloponnesian War  
Thucydides begins making notes and/or writing
- 429 death of Pericles
- ca. 428 Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* produced

ca. 430–425?	death of Herodotus
424	exile of Thucydides
404	Athens surrenders to Sparta
399	execution of Socrates at Athens
338	Philip II of Macedon defeats coalition of Greek cities at Battle of Chaeronea
336	Philip II dies and is succeeded by Alexander
323	death of Alexander the Great end of classical era in Greece beginning of Hellenistic era
146	Rome destroys Corinth and consolidates hold on Greece
49	Caesar becomes dictator at Rome
44	assassination of Caesar
27	Caesar's adopted son takes the name Augustus as sole ruler and first emperor of Rome

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## A Note on the Persian Wars

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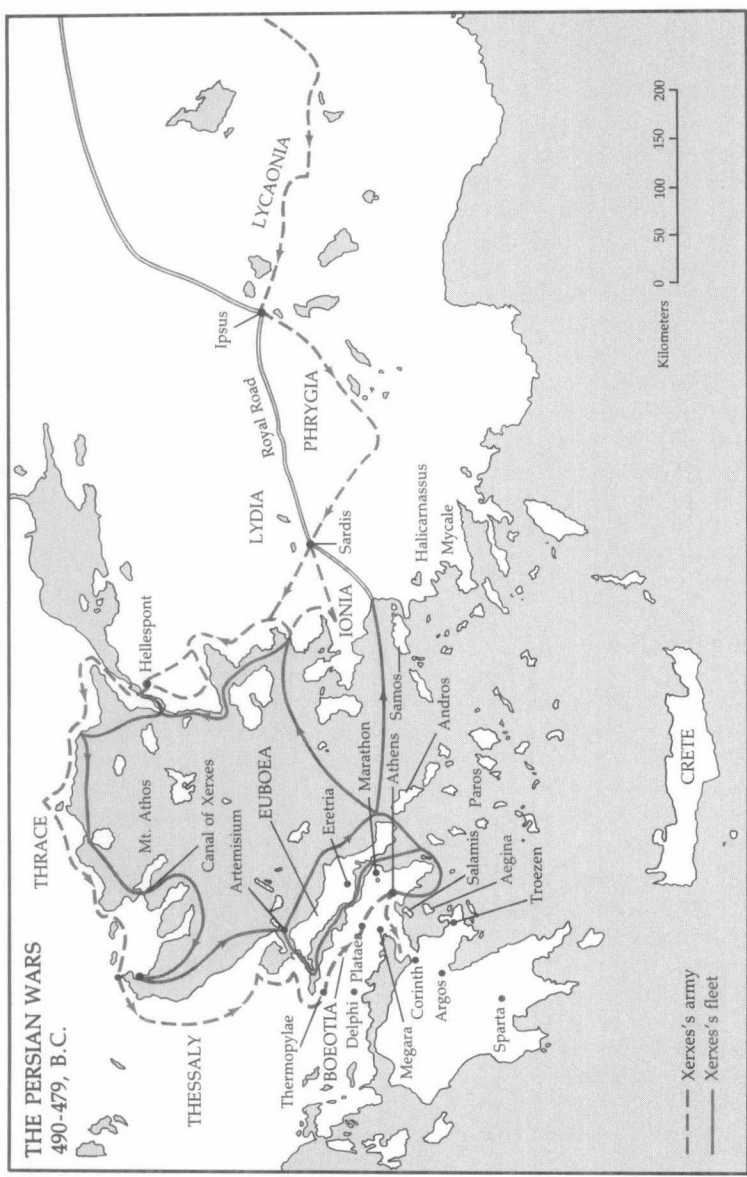
In 499 B.C. the Greek cities on what is now the west coast of Turkey joined in rebellion against the Persian empire, to which they had been subjected during the reign of Cyrus, in the last half of the sixth century. Ethnically united, these Ionian Greeks, as they were called, also had racial ties with several of the mainland Greek states, including Athens. The Ionians sought help in their enterprise from a variety of Greek governments, but many refused. The king of Sparta, which at that time enjoyed by far the highest military reputation among the Greek states, was particularly reluctant to undertake a campaign so far from home. Although the cities of Athens and Eretria sent help, the rebellion failed, and in the course of the hostilities the splendid Persian city of Sardis caught fire.

His anger at the burning of Sardis was probably one factor in the decision of King Darius of Persia to make war on Greece. But beyond that he had heard a great deal about Greece over the years and had probably been interested for some time in adding it to his domains. In 492 Darius sent out an expedition under the command of Mardonius, but it was shipwrecked rounding the Cape of Mount Athos, in northern Greece. A second expedition, commanded by Artaphernes and Datis, was more careful. This time, in 490, the Persians took Eretria, partly by treachery from within, and then encamped on the coastal plain of Marathon, about twenty miles north of Athens. The Athenians sought the aid of the Spartans in vain, and in the end it was a largely Athenian contingent that defeated the huge Persian force against enormous odds.

Darius at once began planning a third invasion, more massive than the second. In 486 he died, but his efforts against Greece were carried forward by his son and successor, Xerxes. In the meantime the Athenians had been persuaded by their dynamic leader, Themistocles, to build up their navy. The Greeks, whose strategy was largely directed by Themistocles, mounted an amphibious defense against Xerxes' troops. In the summer of 480 they met the Persian navy off the coast at Artemisium, north of Athens, and sought to hold the Persian army off at the mountain pass of Thermopylae for as long as possible. Aware of an oracle that his homeland could be saved by his death, King Leonidas of Sparta died fighting heroically alongside a fierce corps of three hundred Spartans after a traitor had revealed a hidden pass to the Persians. With their deaths, Leonidas and his fellow Spartans had bought Greece some time.

While the Persians descended on Athens and sacked it, the Greek navy gathered off the west coast of Attica (the territory of the Athenians). Badly demoralized, the Greek sailors contemplated scattering to their homes. But Themistocles resorted to a ruse to force a battle: a secret message sent to Xerxes persuaded the Persian king to attack. Themistocles' stratagem paid off. The battle that was fought off the island of Salamis in 480 B.C. turned the tide of the war in favor of the Greeks. The Athenian role in the victory led to a distinct shift in the balance of power within Greece, with Athens coming to rival Sparta as the leader of the Greek states. This rivalry in time led to the long Peloponnesian War (431–404), which had devastating consequences for the civilization of classical Greece.

After the Battle of Salamis, Xerxes returned to Persia, leaving Mardonius in command of the forces in Greece. Mardonius was defeated at the Battle of Plataea, near Athens, in 479, and around the same time—some say on the same day—the Greeks defeated the Persian navy off the Turkish coast at the Battle of Mycale. The Persians did not return to attack the Greeks after this, but the fear that they might do so played an important part in Greek politics throughout the first half of the fifth century.



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# THE HISTORIES

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