

Herodotus:  
Father of History, Father of Lies

*By David Pipes*

It was in the early days of the Peloponnesian War that Herodotus completed his *History* and published it. It was something new, something unique. It was not a chronicle, nor was it a local history. It was *historia*<1>-- researches into a major event of the past. It is no coincidence that Herodotus wrote his work at this time. In his *History* Herodotus tells of the Persian Empire, its rise to the height of imperialism, and its faltering and ultimate collapse. Some say that Athens, too, had reached the height of her imperialism, and the Peloponnesian war would bring to Athens what the war Herodotus wrote about brought to Persia. The author of the *History* wanted to do more than retell the events of the past, he wanted to prove a point and make sure the people of the future remembered and learned from the events of the past. He did not want to relate his story. He wanted to relate history.

### **The Life and Travels of Herodotus**

People sometimes let their own experiences filter the way they interpret the events of the past. For this reason it is important that anyone seeking to study the work of another-- whether a history, a diary, or even a personal letter--should devote some effort to the study of that person's life. Only then can a student of history effectively judge the work of the historian in its proper light. Was the author trying to make a point? Was he hoping to convince the reader of something? If there is some deeper meaning to the history that someone creates, the key to unlocking that meaning will be found in his past.

The man known to history as Herodotus is believed to have been born in Halikarnassos around 484 BC. Most of what is known about him comes from a tenth century Byzantine lexicon, the *Souda*, and even that is incredibly brief:

Herodotus, the son of Lyxes and Dryo, a man of Halicarnassus, belonged to a prominent family and had a brother, Theodoros. He emigrated to Samos because of Lygdamis, the tyrant of Halicarnassus, the third in line after Artemisia. For the son of Artemisia was Pisindelis, and Lygdamis was Pisindelis's son. While in Samos, he mastered the Ionic dialect, and wrote a history in nine books, starting with Cyrus the Persian, and Candaules, the king of the Lydians. He returned to Halicarnassus and drove out the tyrant, but afterward, when he saw that he was hated by the citizens, he went as a volunteer to Thurii when it was being colonized by Athens, and there he died and was buried in the marketplace. But some authorities state that he died in Pella...<2>

The *Souda* is not perfect as a biography, however. It is known that Herodotus did not learn the Ionic dialect while in Samos. By Herodotus' day Ionic was the native tongue of the Dorian founded Halikarnassos. There is also speculation that the family may have had partially non-Greek origins not mentioned in the biography, since the father's name and that of another male relative, Panyassis, is Carian, not Hellenic.<3> Also, in the *History*, Herodotus treats the Carians with "a sympathy that he withholds from the Ionian cities that were Halikarnassos's neighbors."<4>

This mixed heritage and Halikarnassos' position on the edge of the Hellenic world would have given Herodotus the historian a unique viewpoint among Greeks. He was aware of the differences between the Greeks and the barbarians, but he does not treat the foreigners as inherently inferior. In fact, he sees them as equals to the Greeks in many ways, highlighting their courage and strength.<5> Herodotus also lived under both the Persians and Athenians, and had the opportunity to compare and contrast both governments.<6>

Many of the facets of Herodotus' personality can be deduced from the events of his early childhood. His *History* makes it clear that he was curious about everything, and that while well read, Herodotus preferred to learn first hand. He wanted to see foreign lands for himself, talk to the people who lived there, hear their stories, and draw his own conclusions.<7> To this end, Herodotus traveled the length and breadth of the known world, intending to visit as many countries as he could and meet as many people as possible.

It is believed that Herodotus first traveled to the north, which makes sense given his inquisitive nature. To the south lay Egypt, a country well known to the Greeks, and one with whom there were "long and ancient ties."<8> All countries to the east of Greece were still under Persian control at this time, and to the west, Greeks had explored and founded colonies all the way to Massilia (Marseille). The North, however, was a vast, unexplored mystery. There were scattered Greek settlements on the coasts of the Black Sea, but beyond them, the wilderness of Thrace and Scythia beckoned.

Herodotus sailed north from Samos, following the coast of Asia minor and to the Hellespont. After sailing to various spots in the Sea of Marmara, he then traveled through the Bosphorus, visiting the city of Byzantium, barely a hundred years old at this time, and Chalcedon.<9> Byzantium was already a city eight miles in circumference by the time Herodotus visited it, and it had been liberated from the Persians only thirteen years before. The time spent in this area must have been very exciting to Herodotus. He saw the straits of the Hellespont where Xerxes constructed his bridge of boats for the invasion of Europe, the spot where Darius made his crossing of the Bosphorus on his way to Marathon, and various other sights rich in legend and tradition.<10>

The coastal areas of the Black Sea had been subdued by the Persians in the sense that they once controlled the coastal cities and could move through the interior with large armies, but the lands in modern day Bulgaria and Romania "were hardly a place through which an unescorted stranger could travel."<11> Herodotus, however, still had the

persistent recklessness of his youth, and on one or two occasions, probably with experienced guides (if not armed guards) penetrated the interior to see the tribes that lived beyond the Greek frontier.

Herodotus viewed the Thracians as a warlike, somewhat inferior people, much like Americans were viewed by their British counterparts during the colonial period. He saw the peculiar, un-Greek, traits and customs, but failed to see the complex social system and tradition which had given rise to them. He traveled their lands northward all the way to the Danube river, and learned from the peoples along the river about the lands and peoples farther upstream, namely the Celts and the Cynetes.<12>

After he had seen as much of the region as he could, Herodotus set out once again, this time for the primary objective of his expedition, the city of Olbia, on an inlet where the Bug and Dnieper Rivers meet. Olbia was the most important Greek city on the Black sea, and for Herodotus it was the natural center from which he could learn about the Scythians and the lands they inhabit.<13>

While in Olbia, Herodotus traveled with various Greek trading vessels, heading up the Dnieper into the region of Kiev. Despite all his travels, Herodotus was no pioneer. He only went where the Greek merchants already could and did go.<14> Because of this, the accounts of his travels in the region are sparse relating mainly to comments on the climate, which was bitterly cold, and the customs and traditions of the people near the shores where the Greeks stopped to ply their trade. From these limited sources, however, Herodotus was able to infer with incredible accuracy the origins of the Scythians. Herodotus was correctly able to identify the Scythians as an Indo-European people (though he did not use that term) who migrated from central Russia in the 8<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries BC. Later studies have shown that he was also able to correctly deduce the circumstances of their emigration into Scythia<15> and discount several of the local legends surrounding their origins.<16>

Risking a violent and gruesome death,<17> Herodotus continued his voyages around the Black Sea, learning about the peoples in the area. He also noted that the farther away a people was reported to live, the odder the people became. For instance, he is told of a people beyond the Scythians who people who supposedly wore black cloaks and ate lice. Beyond them dwelled a race of bald headed men, and beyond them still were a race of men with goats feet, and finally a race of men who slept six months out of the year. Of course Herodotus refused to believe much of what he was told. The people of Neuri, he was told, became wolves once a year. Herodotus immediately discounts the story, a scepticism far in advance of his age, when one takes into account the fact that 15<sup>th</sup> century theologians ruled that not only were there werewolves, but that they were the work of the devil and to be abhorred.<18>

Despite the obvious legends and myths that Herodotus discovered while in Scythia, he also explored truly historic sites. The forts which Darius constructed to secure his advance into Greece were still in existence when Herodotus visited them. Similarly, correspondence between the Scythian kings and the Persian emperors was still in the

collective memory of the peoples there and had great significance on the *History* Herodotus was to write.

It is believed that Herodotus made one more stop on his voyages around the Black Sea. Herodotus directly states that he went to Colchis, and at no other time would he have had a better opportunity to visit the site where Jason and the Argonauts retrieved the Golden Fleece.<19> Herodotus was more interested in events relating to his own age, however, and went to Colchis because they were a tribute paying member of the Persian Empire and to investigate rumors that the people of Colchis were of Egyptian descent. His description of encounters there, however, are considered among the most untrustworthy of all the accounts in his *History*. The conclusions he reaches regarding the origins of the Colchis, while plausible, are hardly incontrovertible, and if not for his own direct statement, there would be little reason to believe he had ever set foot in the country.

From Colchis, it is believed that Herodotus traveled home, first traveling through Panticapaeum and Olibia and then back through the Bosphorus. From the 18<sup>th</sup> century onward, archeological expeditions in southern Russia have verified and expanded the knowledge of the Scythians first passed along by Herodotus.<20> While some of the details of Herodotus' accounts of his travels among the Scythians have been proven false, the vast majority have been proven correct, leading scholars in recent days to take the other accounts of Herodotus, "father of lies,"<21> a little more seriously.

Upon returning from his trip to Scythia, Herodotus took part in the liberation of his Halikarnassos, and succeeded in removing the tyrant Lygdamis from power. Herodotus, though a member of a leading Halikarnassian family, had no desire to shoulder the responsibilities of state,<22> and his inquisitiveness and wanderlust took hold of him once again. It should be noted, however, that some scholars feel that it was Herodotus' unpopularity due to his Athenian ties, and not his restlessness that caused him to leave.<23> In any event, Sometime between 454 and 449 BC, Herodotus set out again, this time for Babylon.<24>

The first stop on Herodotus' voyage was the city of Myriandrus, a Phoenician colony on the coast of Syria, a few miles south of the modern day city of Iskenderun. From there he traveled about 100 miles eastward to the shores of the Euphrates river, which he intended to follow downstream to Babylon. Herodotus stopped at several cities along the river, inquiring as to their history and cultures, and again has been proven accurate in his renditions of their tales.<25>

Herodotus continued his voyage down the Euphrates to the city of Babylon. While in the city he inquired as to its capture by the Persian Cyrus, and the brief revolt which Darius put down in 521. By the time Xerxes came to power revolts in Babylon had become almost continuous, and Xerxes demolished much of the fortifications and destroyed large portions of the city.<26> Thirty years later, when Herodotus visited the city, the damage had been all but erased. He describes the city as being fifty-six miles in circumference and surpassing in splendor any known city in the world.<27> Herodotus also notes the

architectural wonders of the city as well as the dress, beliefs, and customs of the people living there.

At some time before 449 BC, Herodotus left the city and returned home. It was not long after that-- 446 at the latest-- that Herodotus set out on his third great expedition, this time to Egypt. While in the northern, delta region of the country, Herodotus spent his time with the Egyptian priests, who told the Greek of their history, culture, and science. He was intrigued with the differences between Greek and Egyptian priests,<28> the differences in climates and cultures and with the deep and rich history of the region.

The Nile itself proved especially interesting for Herodotus, because its regular flooding of the fields was unknown in Greece.<29> The river behaved as no other river the Greek historian had ever seen. During the summer months, rivers in Greece shallowed and dried up, but in Egypt, the opposite would occur. Herodotus continued to travel upstream, probably in search of the source of the Nile, a subject that he apparently was very interested in and one in which he could find little information. Herodotus dismisses many of the ancient theories on the origins of the Nile, and while he is correct in the refutation of these theories, the solutions he presents for the behavior of the Nile are equally false.<30>

It is relatively easy to tell which places in Egypt Herodotus visited, but the order in which he visited them and the routes he took to get there are difficult to determine.<31> It is known that Herodotus visited Naucratis, and that from there he either went to Sais and Buto, or traveled by sea to Buto and then to Sais, which is far more likely.<32> Then he traveled onward to a place he calls "Papremis," which may have been either Xoïs or Choïs, a city on an island in the Sebennytic branch of the Nile.<33> While there he saw the skulls of the Persians who had been killed by the Libyan king who rose against Darius and investigated the links between the Egyptian kings and the ill-fated Athenian expedition of 460 BC.

From there, Herodotus journeyed on to Busiris, where he observed and recorded some of the practices of the cults of Osiris and Isis. He traveled cross-country to Bubastis, on the eastern bank of the Pelusian branch of the Nile.<34> Though little remains of Bubastis today, Herodotus apparently had fond memories of its tree-lined streets and large temples. From there it is believed that Herodotus traveled to Heliopolis, whose inhabitants, Herodotus believed, were the most learned in Egypt. It is presumed that the priests in Heliopolis related the details of their religion and culture to Herodotus, but for once the Greek historian is tight-lipped about what he had learned.<35>

Leaving Heliopolis, Herodotus wandered south, until he reached the narrows where the Nile is hemmed in by the Arabian mountains. Here, near the quarries which were the source of the stone used for the pyramids was the city of Memphis. Like any tourist of Egypt, Herodotus visited the pyramids, and described the three great pyramids in detail. It is interesting to note, however, that while he must have seen it, Herodotus makes no mention of the Sphinx.

Herodotus continued south from Memphis into Thebes, the chief city of Upper Egypt, and believed to be one of the oldest in the world.<36> The city left him a little flat, however, and for some unknown reason Herodotus has little to say about it. Some have taken this as a sign that this part of the *History* is a fabrication, but as anyone who has found the Grand Canyon dull or thought the Eiffel Tower was just a building knows, sometimes a visitor just is not impressed by the impressive. It is a sign of Herodotus' honesty that when he has nothing to say, he says nothing about it.<37>

This malaise drove him onward from Thebes toward the destination he had sought from the start of his journey into Egypt, the city of Elephantine. Elephantine was a Persian frontier post and marked the southern boundary of the Persian Empire, and Herodotus has no intention of traveling into the country beyond. Instead he relies on hearsay to gather information about the kingdom of Ethiopia, which lies to the south.<38> Aside from the information he was able to gather in Elephantine, Herodotus also had the first hand accounts of Ethiopians who had served in Xerxes' army during its invasion of Greece to tell him about the lands which lay beyond him.<39>

Having reached his ultimate destination at Elephantine, Herodotus returned north to see a few more sites in lower Egypt. He was apparently not in much of a hurry to return to Halikarnassos, either because traveling had become habitual or because he knew that he would not like it when he got there. Still he probably did feel a longing for home, and if home was not Halikarnassos, it was at least Greece. From some port in eastern Egypt, Herodotus set out by boat for Cyrene, a Greek colony five hundred miles to the west.<40> There he continued his investigations into the local peoples, and inquired about the inhabitants of Northern Africa as far as the pillars of Hercules and beyond, though there is little substance to the stories he is told.<41>

From there he sailed on to Tyre, where he apparently still had some questions which needed answering, and left Africa behind him.<42> His purpose in Tyre was to check on the accuracy of what he had been told in Egypt about the origins of Egyptian and Greek religion. These stories were verified at an ancient temple to Heracles in Tyre, where the Egyptians believed the history of their gods went back seventeen thousand years.<43> With this last bit of business concluded, Herodotus finally set sail for home.

Herodotus knew that Halikarnassos was not the place for him, however, and within two years he had left once again, this time for Athens. The city had been sacked and burned by Xerxes in 480, but that had been more than thirty years ago. The atmosphere in Athens, however, was little more comforting to Herodotus than the one he left in Halikarnassos. A law passed by Pericles in 451 ended all hopes Herodotus might have had of becoming an Athenian citizen, and instead of remaining as a resident foreigner, Herodotus began to reconsider his options.<44> Having been as far north, south, and east as any Greek, Herodotus decided to set off once again, this time as a "not-so-reluctant colonist to Italy."<45> Evidence in Aristotle's *Rhetoric* tells us that Herodotus emigrated to Thurioi, an Athenian colony in southern Italy,<46> sometime after 444,<47> where it is believed that he completed his history.

Herodotus did not remain in Thuria, however. He probably returned to Athens sometime around 430. On at least three occasions Herodotus refers to incidents in the opening phases of the Peloponnesian War that tie up loose ends from earlier in the *History*.<sup><48></sup> These events, however, would have been too minor for someone living in southern Italy to have known about.<sup><49></sup> The city at this time was at the highest point of glory, and yet at the pinnacle of disaster, as it moved closer to war with Sparta. It is believed that he stayed in the city from 431-430, but the city was probably starting to lose its luster to the aging historian. Herodotus had already written about one war, he had little desire to write about another.

It is unclear just how long Herodotus stayed in Athens, but a few facts can be inferred from his influence on others. When Aristophanes published his *Archarnians* in 425, there are clear allusions to Herodotus' work,<sup><50></sup> but unlike Aristophanes' treatment of Socrates, Euripides, and others, there are no physical parodies of the Historian. Some scholars take this to indicate that Herodotus was no longer in Athens by 425, as Aristophanes tends to reserve satire for what is prominent and present--"obscurity earned no laughs."<sup><51></sup>

It is most probable that Herodotus returned to Thuria after his stay in Athens, possibly to flee the plague which had broken out there, possibly because there was nothing else for him there. In any event, his days of traveling were behind him and, assuming he left Athens alive, Herodotus settled down to a life of relaxation and editing of his work. His voyages to the four corners of the world brought Herodotus into contact with more peoples than any other Greek of his day, and he used what he learned in his research to tell the story of the war that shaped his youth. It is ironic that with all of Herodotus' efforts to preserve the memories of the events of others, the circumstances, even the location and date, of his own death have been forgotten. While anyone could have related the tales of the Persian war, it is the details and tidbits garnered while traveling that separate Herodotus' tale and have made it stand out for over two thousand years.

## The Well

Clearly, Herodotus was a well read and well traveled man, but no one could create such a work out of nothing. What was the well from which this wealth of knowledge was drawn? What sources did Herodotus use to create such a diverse and colorful *History*? What Herodotus learned from the people with whom he spoke to while on his travels he undoubtedly called upon while constructing his work, but he also drew on the collective learning of all those who had gone before him. The fifth century BC marked the beginning of a period when records and genealogies were being "ferreted out,"<sup><52></sup> and while he was at the vanguard of that movement, it is clear that Herodotus did not move alone.

About 400 years after Herodotus, another historian from Halikarnassos, Dionysius, briefly described the beginnings of Greek historical research by saying: "Before the Peloponnesian War there were many early historians in many places. . . . A second group was born a little before the Peloponnesian War and were Thucydides' early contemporaries. . . ." Herodotus, however, enlarged the historian's scope. "He chose not to write down the history of a single city or nation, but to put together many, varied events of Europe and Asia in a single comprehensive work."<53> This passage seems to indicate that contemporary to Herodotus there existed local historians, all crafting personal histories for one reason or another.<54>

If this passage is taken at face value, it is possible that Herodotus did not have to rely solely on the data provided by his own travels to construct his *History*. Herodotus himself mentions the work of Hecataeus of Miletus,<55> who wrote two books of historical geography and was a major source in Herodotus' writings on Egypt. Unfortunately, not enough of Hecataeus' work has survived for us to judge just how dependent upon it Herodotus was. There are several direct quotes from the geographer's work,<56> but only once outside of Egypt does Herodotus quote Hecataeus.<57>

While we can show that Herodotus had a familiarity with Hecataeus, there are several other sources which Herodotus was probably familiar with but which we cannot identify. Charon of Lampsacus, Xanthus of Lydia, and Dionysius of Miletus all wrote histories of their respective areas that Herodotus could have drawn on, but his dependence on them is unclear. What is clear is that Herodotus regarded himself as an independent researcher, and that his work on the Persian War was an original achievement.<58>

Like any good historian, Herodotus includes as much primary material as he could glean from the people he talked to in his work. Herodotus does not fully trust his sources, however. He takes special care to let his readers know when he is relating what he was told by other people, and often includes accounts that he believes to be false simply because that is what he was told. As Herodotus himself says, "Throughout the entire history it is my underlying principle that it is what people severally have said to me, and what I have heard that I must write down."<59>

Herodotus lived in a time when oral traditions were still preserved with care, and he probably gained most of his information this way.<60> Most scholars believe that even without extraordinary means, oral traditions, cultures, and memories can remain fresh for three generations. The Persian Wars were still within the three-generation span when Herodotus did his research, and Herodotus undoubtedly spoke to living witnesses of the great invasion.<61>

By the 5<sup>th</sup> century, Greek culture was beginning to organize itself with historical learning in mind. Temples and Oracles were beginning to collate their records and temple archives were beginning to gain some acclaim. There are records that show by 403 BC Athens had organized a central archive in the Metroon, the temple of the Mother of the Gods, and some sources claim that the records there went back as far as the sixth century.<62> Though we have little evidence, it is probable that other temples outside of Athens kept

records not just of temple matters but secular ones as well. These document collections, however, would prove little help to Herodotus.<63>

The documentary evidence that is so valued among modern day historians was simply of no use to Herodotus. In the first place, the temple archives that housed what little documentary evidence there was did not simply open their doors to every wanderer who happened by.<64> Unless a document was published--which means it was inscribed and set in a public place--the average person would not have had access to it, let alone been able to read it. Herodotus cites twenty-four inscriptions, half of them Greek, half not.<65> Some of these he wrote down, some he recalled from memory,<66> but for the most part Herodotus does not value documentary evidence very highly-- the reason was not that it was unavailable, but that it was inaccessible.<67>

Herodotus has been called the father of History, and indeed he attempts to earn that title. He follows the same patterns of research and inquiry that have been par for historical investigations for the centuries that followed. Herodotus interviewed witnesses, both first and second hand, looked into documentary evidence, even traveled the same paths his *History* would go, all in an attempt to preserve the events of men, and, as if seeking von Ranke's approval, to tell his story as it actually happened.

### **To Tell a Tale**

Every historian, even the first, consciously and unconsciously shapes his narrative and judgements so as to convey a perception of his subject in a persuasive manner.<68> The historian, by his delivery and style has the power to distance the reader from the subject at hand, or by a simple twist of phrasing invite them into the drama he creates. Herodotus has an agenda that he tries to bring forth in his narrative. There are certain incidents and episodes that the historian wants to accent, and in doing so shapes his *History* to fit his idea of what is needed.

An ideal flow of events would be one in which one page describes one event, in an endless flow of history which begins at the beginning and ends at the ending. This however is a dream which no realistic historian even attempts to attain, and Herodotus is no exception. Herodotus interrupts the rhythmic progress of his history with privileged scenes-- special incidents special only because Herodotus chose them-- designed to develop themes that may not become apparent until hundreds of pages later.<69> He inflates the incidents that he tells with dramatic detail, while at the same time deflating, or even ignoring, other episodes-- sometimes days, weeks, or even centuries go unrecorded all for the sake of dramatic telling.<70>

An example of this can be seen in the seventh book of the *History*. Herodotus wanted his audience to see the wonders that Xerxes accomplished in crossing his army over the

Hellespont on the ill-fated invasion of Greece.<71> To place us there, Herodotus tells the story from the point of view of a local Hellenic who watches and relates the story in awe. Whether this person was actually there or not, or even if he ever spoke of such an event to Herodotus is not really the point. The story is painstakingly told as if it were happening at that time, and the eye-witness narrator draws the reader in so that he or she is no longer looking into a window to the past, but instead is a participant in it.<72>

Despite the literate culture in which he lived and work, there are still numerous elements in the *History* which harken back to the epic days of old. One of the key characteristics of epic poetry is the use of extensive catalogues, best exemplified by the listing of ships in Book II of the *Illiad*. This catalogue is paralleled by Herodotus' listing of the invasion force of Xerxes and to a lesser extent the lists of Ionian cities, Greek fleets, and so on.<73> Genealogy, also a key component in the Homeric narrative, plays an important role for Herodotus. Of course this may be for more practical concerns than a simple reverence for the epic poet. In cultures which preserve their history orally, genealogies and king-lists provide the best and in some cases only means of dating a past event. It may be known that something occurred in the fifth year of King X, but exactly how many years ago that was is unclear. By estimating the number of years between generations, however, it is possible to count backwards and estimate approximately how long ago an event occurred.

Herodotus will also interrupt a speech or other dramatic moment to make sure his audience has followed the story correctly up to that point. In book five, for instance he interrupts Aristagoras' speech by inserting, "While speaking, he was pointing to the map of the earth that he carried around engraved on his tablet."<74> This hardly seems relevant, especially since Herodotus had described the map earlier in that very same paragraph. For a literate man, reading the *History*, there would be no need to repeat the description of the map-- he could easily back up a few lines and re-read the description if it pleased him. This repeating of the description is a throwback to the days of oral tradition and oral epic poetry, where elements are repeated because "in lengthy recitals of epic poetry with attendant fuss and movement in the crowd, there must have naturally have been some loss of comprehension. . . ."<75>

Herodotus draws the reader into his work through the use of other old-time epic devices. In the text of his work, the words and forms he uses also serve the same purpose. He consistently uses the second person singular in his work, almost as though he were talking to the reader personally. For instance, when discussing his (erroneous) belief that all Persian names end in "-s" he writes, "On searching this out, *you* will find no exceptions to this among their names."<76> This also allows Herodotus to permit his readers to hold different beliefs, by showing the existence of different points of view (I believe this, while you can believe that), a "form of presentation rarely found in other historians."<77>

Herodotus' use of digression is also a leftover device from Homeric times.<78> At first glance, the numerous digressions in Herodotus' narrative seem like haphazard placements of material, sometimes relevant, oftentimes not. This view, however, comes from a

modern interpretation of the style of historical writing.<79> The modern historian also arranges his narrative in a dramatic form, but he or she uses footnotes, endnotes and citations to show the inner workings-- the raw data-- of his or her work. These notes allow the historian to share sources of information, present tangential information, and provide basis of opinions. It allows the historian to "keep the forest in view while examining particular trees."<80> Herodotus, however, was not able to use such conventions as footnotes or endnotes (or for that matter, pages, chapters, or books). Because of this, his digressions had to be placed more carefully, so that Herodotus could make his point without losing his audience.<81>

One of the largest problems that many historians have with Herodotus is his use of direct speeches in the later books of the *History*. It is clear that there is no way Herodotus or his sources could have obtained word for word transcripts of the speeches of local Greek leaders, much less Xerxes and the other Persian emperors. Therefore we must accept that these speeches were made up by Herodotus (or his "sources") for some greater purpose.<82> It is possible that the dramatic speech is also a throwback to the epic days of yore, but it far more likely that they serve a serious purpose.<83> Recent scholars have pointed out that in Greek history, the narrative is used to relate historical events, and the personal speeches are reserved to provide rational explanation for the events.<84> These dramatic speeches are used (and composed?) by Herodotus to reveal character, to explain a policy, and, most importantly, to keep the audience interested in the progress of the tale.

One of the traits that separates Herodotus from the many historians both before and after him is the way in which he relates to his audience. He does not lecture them like a superior professor to inferior students, but relates to them like friends and equals. He uses humor, irony, and sarcasm in a way few since have succeeded, especially in the way he relates to the unbelievable or demonstrably false portions of his history. For instance, in the fourth book of the history,

There is a lake in it from which the girls of that country draw up gold dust out of the mud with bird feathers smeared with pitch. I do not know if this is exactly true; I write down just what I am told. Still, anything *may* happen...<85>

The irony is practically dripping off the page as it is read. These planned literary devices show the audience that Herodotus is not rambling uncontrollably as he relates his story, and while they are one step beyond the familiar figures of speech, they are not incapable of ferreting out historical truth and delivering it to the audience.<86> Indeed, it may be Herodotus' use of baser literary constructs which make his *History* so appealing to the people and so disliked by historians.

Herodotus may have been at the forefront of the historical revolution in Greece, but he clearly was descendent from a long literary line. Herodotus makes the jump from the epic poems of Homer to secular history, but he does not forget the roots from which his genre came. It is possible that Herodotus employed the same structures and methods of the epic

poet because of the similarities in their work. Herodotus was not a blind poet, but he did tell a tale. He was not honored as telling the stories of gods and men, but he still sought to make a living by entertaining others. Herodotus used tried and true methods of telling a great story, and incorporated them into his *History* when it was committed to paper. With every word that Herodotus composed, he sought to craft a history so that "time may not draw the color from what man has brought into being. . .,"<sup><87></sup> and to do this he did not use the stuffy, high-minded Greek rhetoric that the philosophers preferred, but instead the epic language of the greatest storyteller ever told.

### Conclusion -- To Influence the Ages

While little is known about Herodotus' life or death, his influence in both his own time and the future is undeniable. Herodotus enjoyed limited fame in his own lifetime-- probably enough to support himself in his later years on the equivalent of the lecture circuit. Fortunately Herodotus was long dead before the true attacks on his character and work were penned, even though the first and perhaps deepest cut was made by Thucydides, a neophyte historian only some ten years his junior. In the years, decades, and centuries that followed in the aftermath of the *History*, Herodotus was seen as entertainer, plagiarizer, and even outright liar, but despite what those who followed him thought about him and his work, he was the first, the father of the new study of history.

Herodotus was known in the Greek world while he was still alive, and his time in Athens did much to enhance his fame. Aristophanes satirizes him in his play *Acharnians*, something hardly justifiable if Herodotus was an unknown scholar. There are also theories that Sophocles borrowed from the stories of Herodotus in his composition of his Theben Trilogy, especially *Antigone*.<sup><88></sup> But it was not long, however, before Herodotus' fifteen minutes of fame were up and others in his field began to attack his work and the fame it brought the historian from Halikarnassos.

Though Thucydides never mentions Herodotus by name, he voices his contempt for his predecessor in the opening of his own work:

The absence of an element of romance in my account of what happened, may well make it less attractive to hear, but all who want to attain a clear point of view of the past, and also of like or nearly like events which, human nature being what is, will probably occur in the future-- if these people consider my work useful, I shall be content. It is written to be a possession of lasting value, not a work competing for an immediate hearing.<sup><89></sup>

Thucydides seems to claim a seriousness which he feels his predecessor lacked, and the fact that Herodotus was followed by frauds such as Ctesias of Cnidus<sup><90></sup> while

Thucydides was followed by serious historians such as Xenophon, Sallust, and Procopius, did little to help the father of History's reputation.<91>

After Alexander the Great's conquests opened up the East, countries such as Egypt and Persia were suddenly much better known. Herodotus was indeed popular during the Hellenistic period, but he was popular because every two-bit intellectual went abroad with the intent of writing a pamphlet disproving some facet of the *History*.<92> The only one of these pamphlets that has survived with the text intact is Plutarch's *On the Malignity of Herodotus*. Plutarch's attacks, however, ring of the same right wing patriotism that can be seen in most xenophobic nation-states.<93> Herodotus praised things that went against the national character of the empire, and to make matters worse, "he wrote so well that people read him."<94>

The Renaissance took its views of Herodotus from the past, with the academic elite still holding him in disdain while the more common scholars enjoyed him as a great read. It is interesting to note that while there were forty-one versions of Thucydides' work in Europe between 1450 and 1700, forty-four versions of the inferior work of Herodotus have been found so far.<95> At some point during this period, Herodotus began to experience a resurgence in popularity. As though caught up in the rebirth of the Renaissance itself, Herodotus was again turned to as people once more turned to the orient as a place of wonder and excitement.

The nineteenth century allowed modern day scholars to examine Herodotus in a new light. As archaeologists spread out over Egypt, Persia and the rest of the Middle East, they turned up evidence that made it clear that Herodotus' "marvelous tales" were not fiction.<96> By the twentieth century, Herodotus had gained a healthy respect as a reporter, and as more and more of his accounts were backed up with archaeological evidence he grew in reputation as a researcher.<97>

The historian from Halikarnassos set out with a simple goal in mind. He wanted to preserve the events of men so that they would not fade from the tapestry of history. It is ironic that through the centuries, all that Herodotus sought to preserve was nearly lost simply because he sought to preserve it. Surviving attacks from contemporaries and would be critics, Herodotus ultimately succeeded in his goal-- He delivered his message to the present day, where modern science and history have been able to prove him correct.

Herodotus-- Father of History and Father of Lies-- What will the future think of him? If success is judged by the completion of stated goals, then truly, Herodotus succeeded with his *History*. In any event, when one takes into consideration the struggles Herodotus and his marvelous tale endured both before and after his death, there can be no doubt that he has earned his place at the vanguard of history.

## Notes

1 J.A.S. Evans *Herodotus*. Boston, Twayne Publishers, 1982. 1.

2 Quoted in Evans, 2.

3 K.H. Waters. *Herodotus the Historian: His Problems, Methods, and Originality*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1985. Introduction.

4 Evans, 3.

5 Herodotus, *History* Translated by David Grene. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987. ix.102 All future reference are from this work with book number first, paragraph number second.

6 Leonard Whibley. *Introduction to The Famous History of Herodotus* New York: AMS Press, 1967.

7 R.P. Lister. *The Travels of Herodotus*. New York: Gordon & Breach, 1979. 28.

8 Lister, 29.

9 Lister, 35.

10 Lister, 37.

11 Lister, 38.

12 The Cynetes are an as yet unidentified people, who are said to have lived west of the Celts. If they existed, they may have dwelled in Spain.

13 Lister, 46.

14 Lister, 46.

15 Herodotus uncovered a legend which said that the original inhabitants of Scythia were a people called the Cimmerians. He postulated that the Scythians had originally dwelt further east and invaded the Cimmerian homelands. In fact, we know today that the Scythians were forced out central Russia by predecessors of the Huns, who were forced out of China somewhere between 827 and 781 BC, and in turn, pushed the Cimmerians out of Scythia some time after that.

16 Lister, 49-51.

17 Most of the peoples that Herodotus describes as neighbors of the Scythians engaged in the ritual sacrifice of all foreigners they captured in their lands. Greek merchants warned

that if a ship crashed near their shores, all aboard could expect to be sacrificed to the Scythian version of Artemis.

18 Lister, 57-9.

19 Lister, 67.

20 John Hart. *Herodotus and Greek History*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982. 163.

21 Herodotus has been called the "Father of History" since ancient times. For almost as long, detractors have referred to him as "Father of Lies."

22 Lister, 83.

23 Evans, 7.

24 The order and dates of his second and third major expeditions, to Babylon and Egypt, are indeterminable from direct evidence. Based on internal evidence and occasional statements made by Herodotus it is generally believed that they voyage to Babylon came first.

25 One queen, Semiramus, was believed to be a fish-goddess by modern historians despite Herodotus' belief in her existence. In fact, some feel that her existence was doubted simply because of the Greek historian's belief. Inscriptions have since been found which document her reign.

26 Lister, 100.

27 Lister, 96.

28 Lister, 112.

29 By this I mean that the Greeks relied on rain to water their fields and not periodic rising rivers. Greece had long had relations with Egypt and there is no reason why the Greeks would not have known about the periodic nature of the Nile's flooding.

30 Lister, 109.

31 Lister, 120.

32 Herodotus seems to indicate that he approached Buto by boat, which would mean he visited that city first. It would make little sense for him to travel first to Sais then travel a hundred miles to the sea to sail to Buto when a 20 mile overland journey was possible.

33 Lister, 130

34 Lister, 134.

35 Lister, 137. Herodotus does not want to give away what he perceives as secrets of Egyptian religion. Luckily we have other sources which were not so concerned with the sanctity of Egypt's faith.

36 Lister, 147.

37 Lister, 148.

38 Lister, 149.

39 Lister, 150.

40 The evidence that Herodotus actually went to Cyrene is spotty, but it does lead scholars to tend to believe his account.

41 Lister, 158.

42 Lister, 159.

43 Lister, 159-60. The temple itself is believed to have been as old as the city of Tyre, which was already, according to Herodotus, 2300 years old when the Greek historian visited it.

44 Lister, 167.

45 Lister, 169.

46 Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, trans. W. Rhys Roberts. Web document

<http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/rhetoric.html>. Book 3, Part 9.

47 This is the date of the foundation of Thurioi.

48 These incidents are: The expulsion of the Aiginetans from their island by Athens (vi.91), the sparing of Decelea by the invading Peloponnesians (ix.73), and the execution of the Spartan ambassadors Aneristus and Nicolaus (vii.137).

49 Hart, 165.

50 Aristophanes tells of a meeting between Athenian ambassadors and Persian officials that mirrors the accounts Herodotus gives of life at Persian court, including the foods served and the dining implements used. Also, the route and means of transport used by the Athenians is the same as that used by prominent figures in the *History*.

51 Hart, 174.

52 Evans, 145.

53 quoted in Evans, 142.

54 Evans, 142.

55 He does so in v.36 and v.125.

56 Hecataeus calls Egypt the "Gift of the Nile" and Herodotus approves of this description (ii.5) without citing the source of it.

57 Evans, 143. Hecataeus provides an alternate version of the expulsion of the Pelasgians from Attica (vi.137).

58 Evans, 145.

59 ii.123.

60 Evans, 153.

61 Evans, 153.

62 Evans, 152.

63 Evans, 152.

64 Evans, 152.

65 Evans, 152.

66 The inscription on the great pyramid at Gizeh (ii.125) is an example of an inscription quoted from memory.

67 Evans, 152.

68 Donald Lateiner. *The Historical Method of Herodotus*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989. 18.

69 Lateiner, 18.

70 Lateiner, 18.

71 vii.54-56.

72 Lateiner, 18-9.

73 Waters, 61.

74 v.49

75 Charles Rowan Beye. *The Illiad, the Odyssey, and the Epic Tradition*. Gloucester, Mass: Doubleday 1972, 97.

76 i.139.

77 Lateiner, 31.

78 Waters, 51.

79 Lateiner, 19.

80 Lateiner, 19.

81 Lateiner, 19.

82 Lateiner, 20.

83 While Herodotus was willing to alter the style of his telling for the sake of clarity and epic tradition, the effort and time he put into verifying his sources leads one to think that Herodotus would not throw out accuracy and truth on a whim. If that were the case, then why voyage to the far ends of the world? It would be far easier to invent a character and have them relate the suspect information in a dramatic speech. (Some scholars-- those who call Herodotus the "father of lies" believe that this is exactly what he did.)

84 Waters, 67.

85 iv.195.

86 Herodotus undoubtedly knew that a lot of what he was told was impossible or outright wrong, and if he knew it, he knew his audience would know it too. Rather than deleting it from the History, however, he includes it with a sarcastic undertone that leaves no doubt about the author's feelings about the source.

87 i.1

88 Evans, 13-17. The story of Antigone's devotion to her brother is matched in Herodotus 3.119 by the story of Intaphrenes' wife, who chose to have her brother freed by Darius rather than her husband.

89 Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*. (i.22) Quoted in Evans, 163.

90 Evans holds Ctesias with something less than contempt. He calls him a "fraudulent romancer, who borrowed Herodotus's style, used him as a source, and repaid him by blackening his reputation." (163).

91 Evans, 163.

92 Evans 164-5.

93 Plutarch takes Herodotus to task for his ambivalent feelings about Thebes, an accurate criticism, then calls him a barbarian lover and berates him for finding barbarian origins for things Plutarch considers Greek. (i.e. Greek religion, which Herodotus says originates in Egypt.)

94 Evans 165.

95 Evans, 165.

96 Evans, 165-6.

97 Evans, 166.

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