

THE INTENTIONS OF HERODOTUS

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Modern criticism has confirmed the old opinion that Herodotus initiated Western historiography. To write history is to gather all available information about a period in the past and present it as a unity which makes sense. Among the factors which help it to make sense is undoubtedly the investigation of the causes behind the events. In the case of Herodotus there are difficulties concerning the idea of cause and its appearance in an unusual context: a collection of mythical tales, artificially linked together and purged of all elements of the fantastic. The thesis of this study is that Herodotus, far from wanting to begin his History with mythical tradition, rejects myth as a source of knowledge of the past. He rejects it, however, having in mind his predecessor, Hecataeus of Miletus. It was Hecataeus who conceived the idea of extracting truth from myths, but to do this he first had to rationalise them, to make them seem credible. With the idea of proving my thesis, this article will analyse the first five chapters of Herodotus' work and compare them with some fragments from Hecataeus.

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When asking about the intentions of a writer of antiquity, we must nearly always content ourselves with an indirect reply which we get through inference. In the case of Herodotus, on the other hand, we can get a reply that is both frank and explicit. In fact, at the beginning of his History Herodotus announces his intentions and the scope of his project, as always, the meaning of his assertions has generated both doubts and controversy. In these pages I am proposing to offer an interpretation of the first five Chapters of Book 1 with the hope of providing a guide to anyone who begins to read this first great work of Western historiography. For those of you who already know the History, my article will be a Socratic invitation to criticise and revise one's own convictions*.

I

The first thing that Herodotus puts on record, as confirmation of his own irreplaceable personality is his name and his city of origin. Later on we will ask ourselves who started this custom, so different to the epic tradition of beginning with an invocation to the Muse, the divine character who makes a mere instrument of the poet, whose name, as a result, cannot form part of the same canto.

After identifying himself, Herodotus offers something that could be construed as an archaic version of a book title of today:

This is an account of the History of Herodotus of Halicarnassus

Herodotus solemnly announces that he is going to expound something that is generically named "historie". But "historie" is not the same as history in any of its two actual senses. It does not mean a succession of events, as they happen, or an account of the succession of events. There is only one passage in Herodotus (Book VII, 96.1) in which the expression in its actual sense -of an account of events- is said to have been found, but, in my opinion, the sense there is also doubtful. The expression "histories logon" from this passage could well be equivalent to the turn of phrase that

* This work is based on a critical edition of the text of Herodotus by C. Hude (Oxford, 1908). My knowledge of the origins of Greek historiography is owed in part to Professor Wolfgang Schadewaldt, whose classes I had the fortune to hear at the University of Tubinga in 1964. Afterwards they were published under the title of "Die Anfänge der Geschichtsschreibung bei den Griechen", Frankfurt am Main, 1982. The translations from the Greek are by the author of the article, except where it is indicated to the contrary.

we are examining: the “logos” or discourse of “historie” would be no other than its account.

So what does “historie” mean then? Modern translators are used to offering us the word “researches” in the plural, as an equivalent, or its synonyms in other languages (“investigaciones”, “Forschungen”). Strictly speaking, to translate it in this way is not wholly incorrect, but it can easily induce error, because it evokes an attitude which is not one of Herodotus, as I will try and show. Generally we speak of research when there are doubts or controversies about a point. It does not make sense that a modern historian investigates whether President Kennedy was assassinated or not. What does make sense is to investigate whether Lee Harvey Oswald was acting on his own or if there was a conspiracy of different people to eliminate Kennedy. This is a point that is not clear, a point where it would be interesting to bring out the truth.

The idea that the primary object of research is truth is the firm conviction of Thucydides, who characterised his own work as “zetesis tes aletheias”, “a search for the truth”, using a term which belongs in a family of expressions that were present in Greek philosophy from Parmenides to Aristotle*. When Thucydides finds himself with different versions of an event, what he does is to analyse them methodically, until he arrives at what he considers is the true version. Because of this, his “History of the Peloponnesian War” always limits itself to record one, and only one, version of events.

Herodotus is, at the same time, more primitive and more free. Different and incompatible versions of the same event appear frequently in his pages. And he does not do this by chance but deliberately. In fact, in well-known reflection on methodology, he states the following:

“For my own part I have to report all that is said, but I certainly do not have to believe everything- and this comment applies throughout my History” (Book VII, 152)**.

His work, throughout the book, he tells us is *legein ta legomena*, “to say what is said”, without guaranteeing its truth. Many times Herodotus

* Cf. Thucydides, Book 1, 20.3: Parmenides, Fragment B2.2 (Diels-Kranz): Aristotle, “Metaphysics”, 982 b8.

** Herodotus, “The Nine Books of the History”, translated by Maria Rosa Lida (Barcelona: 1981), 2 Volumes. In my opinion this a translation of the highest quality. Apart from being very exact, it successfully reproduces the freshness of Herodotus’ style.

includes news in his book that he personally knows is false*. Consequently he does not consider it an imperative part of his job to report the truth. He casts his net into a huge and all-embracing ocean, the ocean of tales, testimonies and narratives, which therefore acquire a virtually autonomous life of their own. Frequently one is almost left with the feeling that Herodotus is delighted with a tale or an anecdote more likely to belong to the world of fable than to the world of what we would call history.

What interests Herodotus is literally to investigate what is being told, what the words are about. It is therefore not unduly foolish to say that Herodotus' History is the great expression of his investigations. Can we use the word "historie" in this context?

Let us observe for a minute the appearance of this word in the title of a work of Aristotle's, his admirable *Historia animalium*, one of the more extensive works of the *Corpus Aristotelicum*. We do not know if the title was allocated by Aristotle himself, since the work in its actual state is, very probably, a compilation made later on, maybe in Rome, by Andronicus of Rhodes. The important thing for us is its content. Different from the tracts *De Partibus Animum* and *De Generatione Animalium*, this piece of writing, or rather this collection of writings, does not contain traces of any attempt to investigate the principles which explain the organisation of organs or their functions in biological reproduction. Its function seems to be that of gathering together everything that can be found out about different classes of animals *before* beginning the investigatory work. It is therefore significant that a title has been assigned to this type of material which includes the Greek word for history. The start of Herodotus' work suggests then that he proposes, above all, to present to his contemporaries the result of what he has managed to find out.

As a precautionary measure before such a rich and complex work from the father of History, we must not exclude a priori the possibility that he adopts in certain passages an attitude more similar to "zetesis" than to "historie", but what we are examining at the moment is what he is telling us to prepare us for the reading of his book. The explanation pursues an end, it has an intention which is marked by the final particle "hos". The

* There are two quite outstanding cases where Herodotus records something which he believes is false but which is in fact true. In Book 2, 22, he rejects the opinion expressed by some people that "the Nile is born from snow that has melted". How can there be snow in such a hot place as Libya, asks Herodotus, to prove the lack of truth of such an explanation? In Book 4, 42, he says that some Egyptian sailors relate that "they have sailed around Libya (i.e. Africa), having the sun on their right hand side". Herodotus says that this is absurd. Any inhabitant of the Southern hemisphere knows which side the sun is when one is going towards the West.

objective itself is not simple. We can distinguish within it three aspects which mark an advance towards a pre-determined direction which I shall attempt to clarify.

Herodotus writes:

(1) “so that the events of men do not fade away with time”.

The first function of his work is to fight against time and the oblivion which follows in its wake. By putting something down in writing we can avoid that blow from a damp sponge which Cassandra mentions to his last parliament in Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*, that disgrace erases all past happiness. But what is that presence that he is trying to preserve? Herodotus specifies it by using a very general term but one that is full of suggestion: *ta genomena ex anthron*, things which have come into being, happenings, events which stem from or have been generated by human beings. The contrast does not appear explicitly, but what does a Greek think is the alternative to the agent of an event? Naturally in the possibility that what has happened is *ek theou*, that it comes from the action of some god. Herodotus certainly admits this possibility (Book 1, 34.1: Book 2, 13.3: Book 7, 18.3: Book 9, 16.4), but what he seems to emphasise from the beginning is that his theme is not about events where the main actors are the gods and the heroes of yesteryear. There is also a new and possible explanation for anyone who has grown up in the world of Ionian literature, the possibility that events have occurred *ek fyseos*, that they have been the product of nature, the underlying force which constitutes and determines everything, the force about which the philosophers of Miletus, a city not so very far from the homeland of Herodotus, have been talking about for more than a century. However Herodotus placed his recollections firmly in the domain of human events. His book is neither mythological nor physiological (i.e. philosophical). In general he is disposed to preserve the memory of what men have done. But within this vast domain Herodotus also identifies a subgroup which forms his second theme:

(2) “so that great and marvellous works, carried out by Greeks and Barbarians, do not remain without glory”.

Not only are we dealing with the preservation of human events in the collective memory, but also going a step beyond, of preventing those events which are designated great and worthy of admiration from remaining without fame or glory or *kleos*. Up to now, the trustees of the task of

proclaiming fame have been the poets. From Homer to Pindarus the canto is the vehicle for praising great deeds. In this way, although he distances himself from poetry by writing in prose, the instrument of the new Ionian science, Herodotus inserts himself into the poetic tradition by adopting one of the tasks of the epic and a part of the lyric poetry of Greece. In this way he keeps alive a bond with the past which Thucydides cleanly cuts off. Thucydides is interested in “observing the accuracy of events, which in the future could be similar or alike according to human nature”. (Thucydides, Book 1, 22). The primary orientation of Thucydides is to capture the past, not to exalt it but to render it useful for the future. What are these erga, these “works” that Herodotus fears will remain without a canto? It does not seem to me reasonable to limit them to tangible results or “monuments”.

It is enough to glance through the rest of the History to admit that we should include not only permanent objects, like the pyramids of Egypt, and more fragile things, like the bridge of boats over the Hellespont, but also heroic exploits, like the battle of Marathon or the defence of Thermopylae, events comparable to the erga Herakleous, the works or labours of Hercules, so beautifully engraved on the internal pillars of Zeus’ temple at Olympus*. It is interesting to note that from the beginning Herodotus expresses a surprising will for impartiality. He does not propose to exalt his own over the foreigner. On the contrary he gives every one their due. He wishes to exercise justice so as to prevent great achievements from remaining without cantos, and therefore without glory, achievements not only of the Greeks but also of their mortal enemies, a passion for impartiality which is also inherited by Thucydides, the Athenian who does not hesitate in praising Spartans when they show decisiveness and courage, and particularly Brasidas, the general whose skilful capture of Amphipolis brought Thucydides himself the loss of his command as general and his exile for more than twenty years. If we only had the aims which have been expressed up to now, namely, a need to give just credit to works of good renown and save them from oblivion, we would not have the work of Herodotus which in fact we now possess. This has as its central theme a gigantic conflict, almost cosmic in its proportions, if we look at, for example, Herodotus’ magnificent description of the powerful army of Xerxes. Herodotus also includes a reference in his preface to his intention to investigate the reasons behind the conflict

(3) “and especially, what causes people to make war on others”.

* B. Ashmole, *Architect and Sculptor in Classical Greece* (Nueva York:1972), Cap. III.

It would be an mistake, in my opinion, to infer from this that Herodotus has a clear concept of historical causality. As we will see when interpreting Chapters 1 to 5, what he is suggesting by using the word “aitie”, the word which we usually translate, with some justification, as “cause”, is something which ties his vision to that other great conflict of Greeks and Barbarians: the Trojan War. The important thing for Herodotus is to bring out into the open the *blame for the war*, as Homer did for the conflict which was decided by force of arms before the walls of Ilium. Paris, by abducting Helen, is the one who took the first step on the road to blame.

Although in many ways he is an heir to Ionian literature, Herodotus still lives immersed in a world in which the tragic categories of blame and justice are the greatest explanatory ones, the categories which allow one to get to the bottom of events and understand exactly what happened. The necessary correlation between these notions is given by nature itself and remains outside all doubt: fault brings a just punishment with it and every fault must be expiated so that the ultimate order of justice will prevail.

But the Greeks of the Ancient World were confronted time and again with the scandal that fault and punishment do not necessarily follow one another: often those who acted dishonestly enjoyed prosperity while the upright suffered great evils, as happened, in another context, to Job. The Greeks certainly could not apply Job’s solution to this conundrum, i.e. to humbly recognise that no man could pass judgement on a God so powerful that He had created the Universe. The pre-classical Greek solution is one of postulating what we would call “chains of culpability”: if a man’s fault is not expiated in his lifetime then his children will pay, or the children of his children or even his more distant ancestors. The punishment of the just, in turn, is explained by the fault of some ancestor who committed a crime which was not expiated during his lifetime. In a chain of culpability, the first crime acquires a special emphasis, especially the one that originated the entire series. For the Trojan War, as we saw, it is the abduction of Helen that puts everything in motion. In Aeschylus, on the other hand, the royal house of Mycenae is struggling under the weight of another first ancestral crime, the seduction of Aerope, the wife of Atreus, by Thyestes, her brother, a disrespect that leads to Atreus afterwards serving Thyestes the flesh of his own son at a banquet and which continues to inexorably promote fresh crimes in his descendants.

In the light of his intention to make public the blame for the war between Greeks and Persians, Herodotus also poses the question as to the first link in the chain, the first violation of justice, which he goes on

expanding until it ends with the supreme arrogance of Xerxes. Xerxes proposes to make his empire a kingdom that will co-exist with the heavenly one of Zeus, a kingdom so vast that the sun will not pass over any land that is outside its boundaries (Book VII, 8).

There is no doubt that Herodotus makes this question the starting point of his History. Unlike Thucydides and Xenophon later, Herodotus did not have the work of a historian before him whose ending would tie in with the beginning of his own opus. Thucydides, in the “pentecontaetia”, that part of the First Book where he establishes a bridge between the two wars (Book 1, 89-117), begins where Herodotus leaves off, and, at the same time, Xenophon in his Hellenica formally recounts the story of the events of the year 411 at the point where they are interrupted unexpectedly in Book VIII of Thucydides*.

So how does Herodotus begin an account which, apart from preserving the historic memory and singing the praises of the great actions of Greeks and Barbarians, also proposes to point the blame at whatever led to the great conflict between both nations? To be able to tackle this subject I should like to quote five chapters of Herodotus:

1. According to the Persians, best informed in these matters, the Phoenicians were the authors of this quarrel, because having come from the Erythraean Sea to our own, they established themselves in the same region that they occupy today and began at once to make large voyages. It is confirmed that they transported the merchandise of the Egyptians and the Syrians, and that they reached, among other places, Argos (which was then preeminent above all the states of the region that we now call Greece): once having arrived, they showed their merchandise and on the sixth or seventh day after this, when they had sold almost everything, a number of women came down to the beach, among them the daughter of the king, who was they say, agreeing with the Greeks, Io, the child of Inachus. While the women were standing by the stern of the ship, buying those goods that most took their fancy, the Phoenicians, shouting to one another, rushed upon them. The greater part escaped but some were seized, among them Io. The Phoenicians took them to their ships and set sail for Egypt.

2. Thus did Io pass into Egypt, according to the Persian story which is not how the Greeks tell it, and this was the first of the outrages or injustices committed (“kau ton adikematon proton touto arxai”). It is said that afterwards, certain Greeks (with whose name they are not acquainted, but probably Cretans) landed at Tyre, in Phoenicia,

* Xenophon “Opera Omnia”, Volume 1, “Historia Graeca” (Oxford: Edo E.C. Marchant, 1900 (re-edited 1982), page 3.

and made off with the king's daughter, Europa. Thus were things equalled out, but, later on, the Greeks were guilty of a second outrage or act of injustice ("aitious tes deuteres adikies genesthai"), because they manned a ship of war and sailed to Aea, in Colchis on the river Phasis, and there, after having finishing the business on which they had come, they carried off Medea, the daughter of the king. The king sent a herald to Greece to demand reparation (or justice) of the wrong and the restitution of his daughter. The Greeks answered that, having received no reparation of the wrong done to them for the abduction of Io, they would therefore give none to the king.

3. They say that in the second generation, Alexander the son of Priam, bearing these outrages in mind, decided to abduct a woman himself out of Greece, secure in the fact that as the Greeks had not given satisfaction for their outrages, so neither would he be forced to give any for his. In fact, when he abducted Helen, the Greeks decided firstly to send ambassadors to reclaim Helen and demand satisfaction for the wrong but their demands were met by having the abduction of Medea thrown in their faces and they were asked how they could reclaim the woman and demand satisfaction, when they had formerly rejected all previous appeals for restitution and reparation.

4. It is said that up to then the aggravations had been nothing more than mutual abductions, but in what followed the Greeks were more greatly to blame for having begun their expeditions to Asia before the Persians had made one against Europe: and that, in their opinion, to carry off women is the true deed of a rogue, but to do one's best to avenge these abductions is the action of a fool: there is no case of men of sense doing this, as it is perfectly clear that if these women did not give their own consent, no one would abduct them. The people of Asia, added the Persians, never made a fuss over their women who were abducted but the Greeks collected a great army, invaded Asia and destroyed the kingdom of Priam, all for the sake of a single Lacedaemonian girl. Henceforth they always looked upon the Greeks as enemies, since the Persians look at all Asia and the barbarian nations that inhabit it as their own and consider the Greeks and Europe as a race and land apart.

5. These are how things happened, according to the Persians, and they trace the storming of Troy to the origin of their hatred against the Greeks. But as for Io, the Phoenicians do not agree with their statements, because they say that they did not use any violence to take her to Egypt, that she made love when in Argos to the captain of the warship and that when she found that she was pregnant, through the shame that she felt for her parents, she left voluntarily with the Phoenicians so as to escape detection. At least that is what the Persians and the Phoenicians themselves say.

I interrupt the quotation without finishing Chapter 5 so as to look a little at what came before and ask ourselves about the meaning of this surprising and entertaining passage (I will return to the chapter in a moment).

We would obviously like to know many things, like, for example, who these Persians are that throw the blame onto the Phoenicians for having started the confrontation between East and West, because some of their sailors happened to be involved in an abduction. We should also like to know who those Persians are (the same ones or others?) who have an authorised version of the Greek myth of Io so different from the Hellenic version. It would also be instructive to know what was the expression on the face of the king of Colchis, that land on the shores of the Black Sea, when they gave him as a reply to his demand for the return of his daughter, that some Phoenicians, sailors from coasts which he had probably never heard of, had made off with a girl from Argos.

Before we attempt to answer this it would be useful to try and understand what is happening in these chapters, so that maybe we can exempt ourselves from an enquiry that is bound to end in failure right from the start. The first thing that springs to mind is that this is a tale of four mythical abductions, those of Io, Europa, Medea and Helen, the last one being the one that gave rise to the Trojan War. The account contains none of the other details that we know from other sources: Zeus does not appear, Io is not transformed into a cow, or in the case of Europa, Zeus into a bull. There is no element of the fantastic, like the flaming chariot pulled by dragons which we associate with Medea and which appears in Euripides. Everything is credible: women who go down to the port to buy seductive merchandise from foreign lands, sailors eager for erotic adventure, and the lack of a sense of humour in the Greeks for unleashing a bloody war over something that is so innocuous. Moreover, the abductions appear to be linked, forming a narrative which is apparently continuous, a chain of illicit acts for which satisfaction is never given. There are injustices which are not paid for voluntarily but which give rise to other acts of injustice. But something unforeseen happens towards the end: the original sin, the event that began it all, the abduction of Io, is discredited because another version of the events exists, the supposedly Phoenician version, in which Io is a young girl, like any other, who falls in love with a good-looking captain, finds out that she's pregnant and, instead of confronting the wrath of a father who will find out that he can't give her away in marriage as a virgin, simply flees happily away with her lover. The net result of the Phoenician version is, of course, that there was no violation or abduction but an amo-

rous encounter. The lady of Argos' affair leaves us without an original sin, and the chain of events without an initial link. According to Herodotus it is worth mentioning these contradictory and mutually exclusive versions from the Phoenicians on one side and the Greeks on the other. But who is right? The Persians or the Greeks? To our surprise Herodotus refuses to take a position in front of what is the decisive question. In fact he tells us:

Whether the events, that I am describing, happened in this way or that I am not going to say: I shall proceed at once to point out the first person who, to my knowledge, inflicted injury on the Greeks and then I shall continue with my History. (Book I, 5.3).

In this decisive declaration there is an abrupt distinction between his previous method in beginning the History and the method which Herodotus himself tells us he is going to adopt. What is it that Herodotus is rejecting? On a first reading we would have said "myths", but now we can declare that it is not simply about the myths that the Greeks of that time, and before, knew, having got them from poets and songs. As we have seen, it is about myths that have been substantially modified, myths, if you will allow me the paradox, that have been de-mystified, reduced to another scale by extracting a nucleus of historical truth from them. This attitude towards myth we are going to encounter later on in Thucydides but who adopted this attitude before Herodotus so that it makes sense that he so explicitly confront the mythical idea? Certainly it has nothing to do with those great witnesses to the tasks of gods and heroes, the Homeric poems.

Who is this irreverent person, capable of divesting the myth of that beauty and fantasy which gives it its charm and strength? We find the most important clue as to his identity within the text of the History of Herodotus itself. In chapter 36 of Book V, when several of the inhabitants of Miletus are deliberating whether to rise up against the Persian empire or not, a traveller and geographer comes onto the stage, a composer of "logoi" (logopoiios), called Hecataeus, a native of the city. He immediately takes up a position against the rising, warning of the tremendous power of King Darius and listing all the peoples that are included within his empire, information which he has picked up thanks to his travels. As he does not manage to persuade those assembled, he gives them a second piece of advice: that they become masters of the sea.

He well knew that resources were scarce but if they seized the treasures of the temple at Branchidae.....he had hopes that they could obtain mastery of the sea and thus they could use these riches

and they would not fall into the hands of the enemy. (Book V, 36.3)*

The idea is worthy of a condottiere from the Italian Renaissance: steal the treasures of a church so as they don't fall into the enemy's hands and, by doing this, be able to get your hands on the ready finance vital for the success of any future military campaign.

Hecataeus of Miletus, unlike his fellow citizens, had no illusions. He is extremely realistic as far as calculating power is concerned and, at the same time, he has absolutely no religious scruples whatsoever. That his proposal involves committing sacrilege on a great scale is of no importance to him. His opinion was undoubtedly rejected for impiety, although the text tells us nothing about the reasons of the citizens of Miletus for the rejection. This little scene serves as a letter of introduction for us to Hecataeus, who, moreover, was the first Greek author to place his name at the beginning of his work, a way of doing things that was both revolutionary and defiant. In this Herodotus limits himself to following his example. But Hecataeus reply to the citizens of Miletus is insufficient for us to answer the question that we are trying to solve. Fortunately, in Felix Jacoby's magnificent collection of fragments of Greek historians we can find several texts which bring us nearer to an adequate reply**.

In one of the annotations to Euripides (Or.872, FGr Hist 1.A, fragment 19), we read that Hecataeus confirms the following, regarding the myth of the daughters of Danaus:

Egypt herself never came to Argus, but her children did, who according to the poet Hesiod were fifty, but who according to me were scarcely twenty.

These words are worthy of an upright man, capable of raising his voice not only against his friends from Miletus but also against the opinion of the prestigious poet of Boetia. Here Hecataeus is not disputing a myth as such, but bringing it back to credibility. A man who has fifty children is a figment of the imagination. A real human being, although he may have many children, would not have as many as twenty. Rationality works not by rejection but by reduction.

Another thing occurs in a fragment of Hecataeus conserved by Pausanias, the traveller of the 2nd century A.D. whose description of Greece

* Translation of Maria Rosa Lida

** F. Jacoby, "Die Fragmente der griechischen Historiker" (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1957)

has been a source of incalculable value. In the 3rd Book (III.25.4: FGr HIst I.A, frg. 27). Pausanias describes that

Several Greeks said in their poetry that Hercules brought out the dog of Hades from there (i.e. from Tenarus) although there is no path underground that brings you through a cavern or any subterranean area which could be inhabited by the gods and where souls might be reunited. But Hecataeus found another plausible “logos” (i.e. explanation), by saying that a terrifying serpent lived in Tenarus, called “the dog of Hades”, because whomsoever it bit would die instantly from the poison. And that was the serpent that Hercules brought to Euristes.

Once again we have a myth, the basic truth of which is not placed in doubt. Something happened in Tenarus. What Hecataeus does is to transform it into something plausible. That a dog lives underground and is the guardian of Hades is rather unlikely. It is more reasonable to assume it was a serpent who, with its poison, killed anyone who came near its lair. If these examples are useful for anything, it is to reinforce the idea that, according to Hecataeus, our access to the past passes through myths. They are sources, maybe the only sources, that allow us access to past reality, but their truth is a truth that has been twisted by fantasy and exaggeration. It is necessary to purify them so as they can show us what really happened. To say that Io and Europa were not carried away by Zeus through the Aegean, but that they sailed away, either abducted or seduced, on boats like ones we know, is only to continue on the same path as the one that was opened up by Hecataeus. Nevertheless, this is what Herodotus rejects so decidedly. Why? Because in his eyes you gain nothing by divesting the myth of its trappings. Once that operation has been carried out, it does not belong to the “genomena ex anthropon” any more, to events that have been undertaken by human beings, but to another domain altogether. There is a passage in Book III (III, 122.2) where Herodotus clearly shows that in his opinion there is an insurmountable lack of continuity between mythical and historical time. A little before he recounts the cruel assassination of the tyrant Samos, who up to this moment has been considered a fortunate man, he says of him:

For Polycrates is the first of the Greeks, as far as we know, who conceived the idea of mastering the sea, if we except Minos of Knossos or anyone previous to him who might have achieved the same. Polycrates was the first of those of so-called “human birth”.

There appears an important distinction here between the human era and the previous unnamed one to which Minos belongs, the lord of the

Labyrinth. This does not count, if what we are talking about is decided on historical precedence.

It is the same distinction, in my opinion, which operates in the chapters that we are examining. The mythical abductions and the Trojan war are outside historical time. Herodotus believes that the efforts of Hecataeus are in vain because he exercises them over a domain which lacks real time. It is not that he thinks that the gods don't exist. As he shows in many places in his account., Herodotus talks of divine intervention and identifiable gods, but these form part of human time and are recognisable. Mythical time, on the other hand, is not within our knowledge and it is because of that, as we saw, that Herodotus refuses to take sides, on the original sin or error, between the Persian version or the Phoenician. Where does Herodotus place the beginning of the series of offences which led both to the sack of Athens in 480 A.D. and the destruction of the magnificent forces of the Persian empire? Herodotus himself declares the following about it with his usual aplomb and security:

I myself will point out who was the first to inflict injustices on the Greeks and then continue with my account

That is to say that Herodotus declares that, before he sets out his "logos", he will identify the individual whom he is certain was the first to begin acts of aggression against the Greeks. This key individual is, apparently, Croesus, King of Lydia.

Making Croesus the prime anti-Greek aggressor poses obvious difficulties because Herodotus himself mentions previous aggressors: Croesus' ancestors- Gyges (Book 1, 14.4), Ardys (Book 1, 15.1) and Alyattes (Book 1, 16.2). The difficulties are mitigated in part if we emphasise the idea that we are not talking about the first, literally, but the first about whom Herodotus had some knowledge. I say that the difficulties would be mitigated only in part because, in the sanctuary of Delphi, Herodotus also had the opportunity to see the offerings presented by Gyges and to hear testimonies about Alyattes. None of these persons, therefore, belonged to a mythical age.

In the light of these considerations it is tempting to hazard a guess that the first aggressor referred to in Chapter V is not Croesus but Gyges. At the end this:

Was the first of the barbarians whom we know (protos ton hemeis idmen) to have sent offerings to Delphi (Book 1, 14.2)

I believe that the solution is unsatisfactory because of an argument that stems from an observation of the context in which reference to the first aggressor appears. Let us go back to Chapter V:

I shall proceed with my account, describing equally the grater and the lesser cities. For many of those that were formerly great have later become weak and those that in my time are great were previously insignificant. As I am convinced, therefore, that human prosperity never stays in one place, I shall mention both equally.

The reference to the individual who started the chain of culpability appears to be associated to the other aspect of Herodotus' impartiality: the imperative of not judging the past in terms of the greatness or misery visible in the present. The profound reason behind this new dimension of impartiality is the unstable nature of the "anthropeie eudaimonie", of human prosperity or happiness. It is the permanent goal of man's aspirations and, therefore, the ultimate motor of events. Nevertheless we are accustomed to losing sight of its fragility. Herodotus cannot fail to consider this in his account because Xerxes, the central figure of the drama that unfolds before our eyes from Book VII, is an extreme case of one who falls from greatness into misery.

But Herodotus, with the instincts of a great writer, prepares our understanding of this great drama of sin and justice by beginning it with a figure who is a paradigm, inasmuch he anticipates, albeit on a lesser scale, the final outcome of events. This paradigmatic figure is none other than Croesus, King of Lydia, who believes himself to be the happiest of men and who ends up losing his riches and his kingdom. To explain this he brings us an interpretation of the moving meeting between the King and Solon, the sage of Athens, and tells us of the fall of Sardis, the capital of Lydia, with Croesus playing the subsidiary role as advisor to the Kings of Persia. But in analysing this, we will have exceeded the limitations imposed on this study.

Thus we have seen that, in his History, Herodotus refrains from starting with that much vaunted treasure of the Hellenic people in their original state, the myth: he does not making the myth his point of departure. His intention is to prevent human affairs from falling into oblivion and to avoid great deeds from remaining without glory. His particular goal is to identify who or what was to blame for the great conflict that started between Greeks and Barbarians. And the blame is placed squarely on a tangible figure, Croesus, for an act of arrogance: Croesus, the rich and powerful King of Asia whose fall illustrates, in a paradigmatic manner, the historic cycle of crime and punishment, a cycle which is perhaps valid for every human action. □