

Sources *that* study Antiquity: study perspectives on Herodotus'
Histories, or how have the historians interpreted the *father* of
History

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Abstract

The study of Antiquity presents theoretical and practical challenges to the researcher in every investigation. Studying, however, a source that not only contains potential information about the Past, but that also produces an historical investigation, confronts the researcher with a whole different kind of challenge, one that necessarily calls into question the understanding of the discipline and its praxis. This article aims to analyse this subject by considering the case of the *Histories*.

Not long after Herodotus wrote it (around the 5th century BC), the *Histories* generated much debate, either about the way in which the narrative was constructed, the subjects the author took closer attention to, or the methods used throughout the research. This article provides some study perspectives on both content and form of this source, in order to understand how have historians approached and interpreted Herodotus' work since then.

Keywords: Herodotus, Study perspectives, Historiography, Methodologies.

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A researcher of ancient History must attend to two particular issues in his/ her studies, of methodological and epistemological nature respectively: the first one concerns the sources for the investigations, and the second one relates to the immanent (yet, quite challenging) issue of Antiquity's (growing) distance in time.

Sources¹ are a necessary part of historical investigations. To begin one, the researcher must deliberate on what will be used as a source and evaluate how to approach and interpret each one. Parallel to these leading questions are considerations about the accessibility of the content, the relevance of a source for a given subject, likewise the acknowledgement of its place (physical and symbolical) back in the *where* and *when* it belonged to. All these queries reveal a set of preoccupations which inevitably emerge at the point of studying the Past. The answer to each one of them may vary, leading thus to different approaches and interpretations of a given subject².

The questions addressed above are not exclusive to sources of Antiquity - on the contrary, they permeate all historical chronologies – and neither is the second issue raised above, i.e. the length of time that separates the researcher from the object of study.

Modern historiography has been written almost entirely in the *past tense*. There is nothing impeding it, in its core, to study Present times, but it has been somewhat a tacit agreement among historians not to do so, maybe based on the assumption that time distance assures a better position for reflections of this sort than belonging to the epoch itself. When studying Antiquity, if time is remote enough to allow (according, *lato sensu*, to non-postmodernist theories) detached interpretations and prevent near-sighted ones, what can be said about the consequences of utterly disparate environments of author and object? When studying a culture long gone, buried under multiple layers of History, surviving irregularly, scarcely at times, mostly *pale*, sometimes displaced in space and certainly in time, can distance still be perceived as an advantage to the researcher?

¹ I consider *source* in this article as a «trace of the past» in need of being articulated by the historian, and not a «pristine [i.e. original, pure] piece(s) of evidence» or a raw documentary of «the real past», with «latent explanations», which the historian merely allows «to speak for itself». It becomes evidence only once it is used «on behalf of (some or other) argument (interpretation)», therefore being «the product of the historian's discourse». The quotes cite Jenkins 2003, 58-60.

² « (...) the sources may prevent just anything at all from being said, nevertheless the same events/ sources do not entail that one and only one reading has to follow. » Jenkins 2003, 15.

It seems the answer to these questions is rather bittersweet: although the gap is insurmountable, i.e., it cannot be dealt with successfully, it is also the very reason justifying the emergence and assuring the future of the discipline. Indeed, «Epistemology shows we can never really know the past; that the gap between the past and history (historiography) is an ontological one, that is, is in the very nature» of it (Jenkins 2003, 23). It became, however, historians' goal since the very beginning to devise methods to cope with that fact in pursuit of an intelligible, meaningful Past.

The conference *Sources to study Antiquity* tackled these issues by proposing academics to take a long, hard look at the ways in which it is possible to approach this vast chronology which is Antiquity, namely through the usage of manifold sources.

The present article wanted, however, to take a step further, and so it adapted the conference's title into "Sources *that* study Antiquity". This change of scope aims to bring forth the question of how do historians approach sources that not only contain potential information about the Past, but that also procure to inquiry it themselves. How exactly do historians interpret a source which has the purpose of producing a historical discourse? A source that formulates an interrogation or a goal at the debut of the investigation, in order to provide a certain audience with a perspective on a subject?

In addition to the two theoretical issues presented earlier, the historian must face historically different ways of thinking and doing the same job. The *line* between author and object is necessarily challenged.

Having this in mind, a specific Ancient author immediately stands out, especially for the multiple, often conflicting, views around his work. This article will refer to Herodotus of Halicarnassus and his *Histories* with the aim of providing study perspectives on this source. The emphasis will be, nevertheless, on the relationship between subject and object, historian and the *Histories*, hence the historiographical overtone of the approach.

The *Histories*, or the *Enquiries*, is a nine-book-long text, written around the 5th century BC. It is generally introduced nowadays as «the oldest surviving historiographical work of Antiquity. Four times the size of Homer's *Iliad*» (Baragwanath and Bakker 2009, 1) – indeed, a notable source.

Each of the nine books is named after a muse, and it is of great relevance that the first to be mentioned is Clio, the muse of History. In fact, to be rigorous, since History means something quite different nowadays, she should rather be mentioned as Clio, the celebrator of great deeds and accomplishments³. Besides, that is exactly how Herodotus describes his work: «Hérodote de Thourioi expose ici ses recherches, pour empêcher que ce qu'ont fait les hommes, avec le temps, ne s'efface de la mémoire et que de grands et merveilleux exploits, accomplis tant par les Barbares que par les Grecs, ne cessent d'être renommés; en particulier, ce qui fut cause que Grecs et Barbares entrèrent en guerre les uns contre les autres. » (Herodotus 1970, 13).

³ Her name derives from the Greek root *klēo/kleio*, meaning "to recount glorious deeds", "to make famous" or "to celebrate". Liddell and Scott [1963], 379.

The main goal of this work was to establish the causes for the Greco-Persian Wars. In order to do so, Herodotus travelled through Greece, through Persian lands and also lands the Persians could not subdue, procuring throughout this journey cultural, historical and even natural reasons to explain the conflict. For that purpose, he encompassed historical, mythological, ethnographical and geographical material, to name a few, in an extensive effort to carry out the *historiē* (“a learning by inquiry” in ancient Greek⁴), not just concerning the Greek perspective, but that of the “barbarians” as well.

If stating the quantity of composite content⁵ is insufficient to describe the uniqueness of this work it is because, simultaneously, there is a puzzling unprecedented methodological (and ultimately epistemological) preoccupation throughout the research⁶ (Bakker 2006; Lloyd 2002, 419; Luraghi 2007, 76). This is particularly reflected on the strong presence of the author/ researcher in the narrative, evidenced by the occurrence of statements in the first person⁷, but also with references regarding the process of gathering information (Luraghi 2007, 76).

Briefly presented, both content and form - *Histories* and its meta-*historiē*⁸ - have been interpreted very differently over time.

Although born in today's Turkey, Herodotus belonged to a Greek cultural framework, for this panorama extended far from mainland Greece. It was through the inheritance of Greek tradition by Europeans that this author would come to be granted the paternity of Western historiography (Evans 1968, 12).

Cicero (2nd-1st century BC; Evans 1968, 11) was probably the first Ancient author to clearly recognize Herodotus as the first person (in that part of the world) to produce an historical account - someone concerned about the causes and context(s) of given human events, or, ultimately, someone concerned about giving them meaning. At the same time, however, Herodotus' reputation as “deceitful” and “malicious” (Plutarch⁹; Baragwanath 2008, 10-11), a “storyteller” or an “ignorant” (Evans 1968, 12 and 14) had already taken over most of the discourses about him. Either because of his methods for giving information¹⁰ (“deceitful”), or his “failure” to preserve *kleos*¹¹ (“malicious”), the “incongruities” and tells

⁴ Liddell and Scott [1963], 335.

⁵ Or as Brock put it: Herodotus' task involved «complex and multifarious material, a time-frame of a couple of centuries and a huge cast of characters» Brock 2003, 15; also Thomas 2006, 60.

⁶ «Other ancient historians rarely dealt with the question of how they gathered information, usually confining it to preliminary statements at the beginning of their works. » Luraghi 2007, 76.

⁷ «as I have been told» (8.38), «I cannot write down exactly» (6.14.1), «That is what I heard» (2.55.1), or formulations of opinions. Luraghi 2007, 76.

⁸ This expression belongs to Nino Luraghi; it refers to the discourse of the author as an inquirer.

⁹ «Plutarch [1st-2nd century AD] was a perceptive reader of the *Histories*, and its first explicit critic – as well as the most disapproving. Driven by frustration at Herodotus' unjust treatment of his hometown Thebes, his *On the Malice of Herodotus* (...) often strikes us as overblown and mean-spirited. Many of its observations are nonetheless keen. » Baragwanath 2008, 9.

¹⁰ E.g. by giving many versions of a story (some discrepant), not expressing then his view on what he believed to be true. Baragwanath 2008, 22.

¹¹ E.g. by making a charge and then withdrawing, although propagating and so undermining famous deeds and their actors in this manner. Baragwanath 2008, 10-11, 13 and 15.

of wonder¹² (“storyteller”) or the seemingly acritical, ingenuous and disorganized account (“ignorant”).

From no longer than a few generations after Herodotus’ death (Evans 1968, 11), throughout the development of the discipline of History, speaking of him would, then, first and foremost mean to speak of his reliability (Van der Dussen 2016, 155), but, ultimately, of one’s definition of History (Van der Dussen 2016, 156). «Herodotus’ prose (...) can be read in a multiplicity of ways, depending on what interests each reader brings to the task. » (Dewald and Marincola 2006, 7). And so it was. More immediate successors on the historian’s *craft* would claim to be against him precisely because he did not meet what they conceived as History. Thucydides (5th-4th century BC)¹³ and Plutarch are among the most noticeable ones.

These Ancient authors believed a historian’s work should be contemporary to its writer and with a limited purpose, as opposed to being one about distant Past¹⁴ and with a large scope. Moreover, it should be educational¹⁵, valuable to men in the future (Evans 1968, 12 and 14), not a tell of the “exotic”, with an “entertaining”, “vivid” writing or “praise-and-blame” kind of formulations (Baragwanath 2008, 10). More importantly, the historical account could not have the objective of arbitrating quarrels or points of view¹⁶ - much less with tendencies to be “philobarbaros” (as Plutarch named Herodotus)¹⁷ –, especially if pursuing for that matter other than political reasons for the event (Evans 1968, 16; Van der Dussen 2016, 160).

Much would be said and written about the *Histories* since Antiquity. The 19th century, however, became a turning point in herodotean studies. According to Evans (1968, 15), it created a *mythology* of its own¹⁸ because, adding to the “true or false” debates, and to one’s consideration of the discipline, 19th century historians introduced debates on *Quellenforschung* (the “study of sources”) (Marincola 2007, 2).

¹² E.g. by making plot/ perspective changes, “out-of-place” commentaries and digressions. Baragwanath 2008, 12-13 and 22.

¹³ « Herodotus had the bad luck, however, that shortly after finishing his *Histories* he had Thucydides’ *History of the Peloponnesian War* as his successor. (...) Thucydides as well based his inquiries on oral sources, but, in contrast to Herodotus, the object of his study, the Peloponnesian war between Athens and Sparta (431–404 BC), made him not only a contemporary of the events he described, but also to have the advantage of being acquainted with the language of the oral information his study is based on. Besides this and again in contrast to Herodotus, he merely concentrated on political history. Because of these features, in antiquity Thucydides was generally considered more trustworthy and accordingly taken more seriously than Herodotus. » Van der Dussen 2016, 156-157.

¹⁴ «until the nineteenth century knowledge of the past one was not personally acquainted with was generally considered to be dependent on the information provided by historians or eyewitnesses. It was only with Georg Niebuhr (1776 – 1831) that the notion developed that historical knowledge should be based on the independent study of sources instead of authorities, that is, on documents, archaeology, and all kinds of artifacts. (...) Since he could not rely on previous studies and neither confined himself to contemporary history, Herodotus therefore embarked on a project that until the nineteenth century was considered inconceivable» Van der Dussen 2016, 159-160.

¹⁵ «[Herodotus] aimed at giving a picture of the vicissitudes of history, whereas Thucydides [like other ancient authors] was in search for certain lawlike essences» Van der Dussen 2016, 161.

¹⁶ Plutarch: «on the level of events the historian should write what he knows to be true, but in the case of doubt, prefer a better account to a worse (855e), so too particularly when delving into the necessarily more obscure realm of the hidden causes and motives behind those events» Baragwanath 2008, 13).

¹⁷ Being able to deconstruct Greek norms negatively was not very well seen by some ancient historians. Cartledge and Greenwood 2002, 367.

¹⁸ Very much linked to the way, once again, History writing was perceived at that time.

Owing that, Herodotus' credibility fell into deep suspicion. Firstly, because he did not give a thorough explanation on his choice and use of sources, often "failing" to mention some of them; and secondly because he resorted more to oral than written sources, which would only find its place in History very recently. These were the main set of critics made to his account during this period (Hornblower 2002). The work would only have its credibility restored in the beginning of the next century, by a man named Felix Jacoby, a German classicist and philologist (Dewald and Marincola 2006, 4).

His studies introduced a new form of defending Herodotus' reliability: being the first (to be known) to show a particular concern with making intelligible Past and Present, it could not, however, be expected of him to resemble contemporary historiography. Therefore, Jacoby suggested that the studies should not revolve so much around the trustworthiness of his accounts, but the *parenting* issue: «being without doubt the father of history, he is not truly an historian either, as if paternity must necessarily bear an unfinished part. »¹⁹ (Hartog 1999, 376).

From there onwards, this interpretation wielded influence in the following studies, which would either agree or oppose it (Hartog 1999, 371). But soon these "father" or "liar" polarities lost strength, when the premises in which the debate was supported were *emptied*. Despite having been an important change in herodotean studies, the reason for diverting discussions about the trustworthiness and validity of Herodotus accounts stopped being because he was the first of the *job* (and therefore supposedly less *apt* for the task).

History would find itself on the verge of great conceptual disruption. Postmodernist, Anthropological and Postcolonial studies, represented by names such as Michel Foucault, Hayden White, Edward Said and Jan Vansina, redefined the discourse concerning this subject, giving researchers on Herodotus' *Histories* a whole other possible interpretation (Dewald and Marincola 2006, 5).

It was after the second half of the 20th century that Postmodernism²⁰ emerged. When applied to the historical discourse (later in the century), it led some of its theorists to question history's *golden calfs*, namely, the pretension for objectivity and the assumption

¹⁹ My translation.

²⁰ On the origins of the concept: «It refers, first of all, to a complex of anti-modernist artistic strategies which emerged in the 1950s and developed momentum in the course of the 1960s. (...) From this anti-representational, formalist point of view [which is modernism], postmodernism gives up on this project of self-discovery and is a (cowardly) return to pictorial narrative, to representational practices. (...) However, for many of the American literary critics that bring the term postmodernism into circulation in the 1960s and early 1970s, postmodernism is the move *away* from narrative, from representation. For them, postmodernism is the turn towards self-reflexiveness (...). The other arts further complicate the picture. (...) Yet, there is a common denominator. In their own way, they all seek to transcend what they see as the self-imposed limitations of modernism, which in its search for autonomy and purity or for timeless, representational, truth has subjected experience to unacceptable intellectualizations and reductions. » Bertens 2005, 1-5.

On the development of the concept over time: «postmodernism has been defined as the 'attitude' of the 1960s counterculture (...) In the course of the 1970s, postmodernism was gradually drawn into a poststructuralist orbit. (...) postmodernism gives up on language's representational function and follows poststructuralism in the idea that language constitutes, rather than reflects, the world, and that knowledge is therefore always distorted by language, that is, by the historical circumstances and the specific environment in which it arises.» Bertens 2005, 5-6.

of the existence of an historical truth²¹. This meant that Herodotus' subjective presence in the narrative (pondering and commenting on the various subjects, for instance), his use of literary techniques (for purposes of persuasion or reflection, for example) and his avoidance of a straightforward, firm perspective on events²² were no longer perceived as incompatible with the nature of his work. In fact, it is rather curious how «the *Histories* can contribute to modern debates on the boundaries between history and fiction»²³ and how, because of that, they have become «all the more alluring, to twenty-first century» historians (Baragwanath 2008, 5).

Anthropology also contributed to a great change in herodotean studies. With the rapid spread of postmodern tenets across Humanities, cultural studies saw a «spectacular upgrading» (Bertens 2005, 10). «Since the awareness that representations create rather than reflect reality (...), representations have been endowed with an almost material status. Culture, long seen by many as determined, either directly or indirectly, by a more fundamental mode of production, has now become a major constitutive power in its own right. In fact, for many theorists signs (a term which of course includes all forms of representations) are the most important constitutive element in the contemporary world²⁴» (Bertens 2005, 10-11). With the valorization of cultural studies within Anthropology came the interest on mentality(ies)²⁵, tradition(s), ethnography, and (especially) the elevation of oral sources to the same level of potentiality as those written²⁶ - therefore, putting to rest the attacks on Herodotus' choices for content and sources (Dewald 2009, 496-497).

Postcolonial studies²⁷, on their turn, have made great contributions to the development of theories concerning cultural contacts – an ever-present issue across *Histories*, but that only recently began to receive some interest. Moreover, by calling historians' attention towards the peripheries, this theory led into a change in the interpretation of Herodotus' discourse on other lands as mere “digressions” or “fait-divers” (Dewald 2009, 496; Dewald and Marincola 2006, 5-6).

Although summarized, this contextualization serves to inform the general panorama that would bring to a new phase the interpretations about Herodotus' *Histories*. One would no longer debate the truth or validity of his accounts since History itself was now perceived to have a permanent subjective dimension in the process of constructing a narrative about Past events.

Most historians, then, turned to an unexplored field, where now every source (including this one) had its own valid significance (Marincola 2007, 3-4), where something said, or

²¹ On a definition of History according to this theory see Jenkins 2003, 31-32.

²² «his account of the past [is more] a matter (...) of possibilities rather than certainties. It remains to some extent provisional, open to his readers' collaboration in extending and modifying it.» Baragwanath 2008, 26.

²³ To know more about this debate, see White 2001, 39-63.

²⁴ See for instance Geertz 1973.

²⁵ It led herodotean studies to investigate matters such as the intellectual environment in Greece and the treatment of and attitudes toward foreigners, which had a tremendous impact in the understanding of the *Histories*. Dewald 2009, 496.

²⁶ On this topic see Portelli 2012.

²⁷ «Post-colonialism (or often postcolonialism) deals with the effects of colonization on cultures and societies. (...) originally used by historians after the Second World War» Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 2008, 168.

something silenced in a text, had equal importance. A field where a perspective, as that of Herodotus, could say more about this period and Greek culture and mentality than it was ever imagined. Hence the change of foci of the studies: Herodotus as an author, his aims, literary techniques, his views on what he was doing and the themes he was dealing with (Dewald 2009, 495; Murray 1987, 93), to name a few.

The reception of the *Histories* by other authors in later periods did not answer if this was, after all, History in its own time. To know that the genre of this work has been interpreted according to contemporary assumptions about the nature of a historical investigation allowed historians to move from that discussion into another one, that is, to what History and the writing of History meant in the 5th century BC.

Some historians did a remarkable work comprehending the Ancient Greek notion of History. To begin with, a distinction needs to be drawn between the craft and the object: on the one hand, if the Past, mythical or historical, had a great importance in Greek society, the investigation into the Past, on the other hand, occupied a *shy* niche²⁸ (Nicolai 2007, 13-14). Additionally, if one was asked about this niche, it was mandatory to recognize Homer's writings, for instance. The reason for that lays in the fact that, for a very long time, the Epic was the only repository of Past events (Finley 1965, 284) - and with such an ascendancy that it would convey a traditional objective of History, that is, to preserve glorious/ remarkable deeds²⁹ (Finley 1965, 283; Hartog 1999, 17-18; Nicolai 2007, 15). This becomes very clear once it is realized that the patrons of the Epic text, the Muses, were no other than the daughters of Mnemosyne/ Memory. The Arts were, after all, attached, from *cradle*, to the Past (Nicolai 2007, 16).

Having the Epic, and its authors, such an overwhelming presence, it was difficult (surprising even) for another genre to emerge with such vigour³⁰. The genre to come and occupy dominantly that very niche talked about would be the one Herodotus initiated (Nicolai 2007, 17).

In comparison with the Epic, both genres sought to «domesticate death» (Hartog 1999, 18) but, when doing so, they used different resources – and here poses the great divide between the new genre and the genre used until then to speak of the Past: where the first asked for inspiration from the Muses, Herodotus pursued other devices for achieving authority (Hartog 1999, 25-27; Luraghi 2006, 86-87).

²⁸ « [Herodotus] not only actually lived in the renowned fifth century BC in the Greek world, but also represented a substantial part of the so-called 'Greek miracle', which peaked in this century. It is not customary, however, to see Herodotus (...) within this context, since, with regard to this period, usually reference is made to the pre-Socratic philosophers, the sophists and Socrates, the tragedians, statesmen like Pericles, and Greek architecture and sculpture as examples of this blooming era. (...) [it] relates to the fact that the Greeks did not value history highly. Aristotle is an exemplification, when he compares in his *Poetica* history with poetry, saying that the latter is of more value – with an explicit reference to Herodotus – since it deals with general truths and not particular events. » Van der Dussen 2016, 156.

²⁹ In the same way, it led ancient historians to believe their accounts had to teach about morals and conduct, that the historical narrative had to be able, like the Epic poem, to deliver a message to the reader, so it could be useful for later times (Finley 1965, 284). There are discreet signs of this in Herodotus, but it is more pervasive in Thucydides, for example.

³⁰ Ionian philosophers and their school of skepticism could be presented as a cause for that rupture. The development of the *polis* and of politics as a discipline are other appointed reasons («The new look had to be secular, non-mythical»). Finley 1965, 299-300; also Thomas 2006, 60-61.

He created a whole new discourse, based on his eyewitness testimony, on oral information and on his judgements (Dench 2007, 499; Luraghi 2006, 77; Van der Dussen 2016, 164) - respectively, *opsis*, *akoē* and *gnomē*. The following citation is a plain example of the latter: «Jusqu'ici, ce que je disais est tiré de ce que j'ai vu [*opsis*], des réflexions que j'ai faites [*gnomē*], des informations que j'ai prises [*historiē*]; à partir de maintenant, je vais dire ce que les Égyptiens racontent [*akoē*], comme je l'ai entendu; il s'y ajoutera quelque chose aussi de ce que j'ai vu par moi-même [*opsis*].» (2.99.1; Herodotus 1972, 130).

To these instruments we may add yet another kind of authorial presence: his presence as a narrator, organizing the text (Bakker 2006, 95; Brock 2003, 9) by guiding the narrative (and the reader³¹), interrupting or explaining pieces of information³² (Dewald 2007, 97). In fact, this is a work strongly structured in order to display the process of investigation, involving purposely the reader on the *Histories'* making³³, for the creation of this new kind of authority and authorship (Baragwanath 2008, 2 et seq.; Dewald 2007, 94 and 98).

However, more than the speech, what exactly made this piece of work History(ies), and not a concoction of popular traditions, a glorifying poem or a mythography was the simple fact that it privileged reality³⁴. And, more than that, it sought its meaning (Dewald 2007, 99), while simultaneously (according to the most recent views about the discipline) admitting the limitations of the knowledge itself.

Despite this, historical writing was never a *scientific* discipline in Antiquity, like philosophy for example was (Nicolai 2007, 17). It was more a boundless, experimental even, ground, especially in the case of Herodotus, as he convoked many other *genres* (ethnography, oral history, geography...) to produce his large scope work, so difficult to fit in any category then and now (Bakker 2006, 92; Nicolai 2007, 19; Thomas 2006, 60). If the Past is a foreign country³⁵, it seems its study was born an *outcast*.

In spite of being a new genre, we can tackle some of the intellectual environment to which it certainly belonged to. Indeed, Herodotus shows signs of familiarity (influence even) with theories developping in both science and methods of argument and persuasion at

³¹ Reader or listener since «the text (...) is performed orally or read out (as in the case of the original mid to late fifth-century BC audience), and (...) [read individually] (e.g. Plutarch, moderns). » Baragwanath 2008, 6, footnote 15.

³² In order to help the reader cope with such an enormous and complex work, Herodotus may have opted to adopt «an audible, accessible, ever-present authorial presence, reassuringly guiding the audience along the route of the narrative». But it is rhetoric, and not methodology, that has him drawing «the audience on to respond positively to» him. Brock 2003, 15.

³³ «readers are invited all the more vigorously to judge matters for themselves. The role was one that Herodotus' fifth-century audience was particularly well equipped to undertake: they were practiced in the processes of speakers' debates, in their various contexts – lawcourt, assembly, sophistic *epidexis*, tragic performance, and so forth – and at all levels, public and formal through to private and informal» Baragwanath 2008, 18-19.

³⁴ Being myths only given as supplementary information which he can then criticize or just abstain from doing so.

³⁵ Taking David Lowenthal's expression.

that time, namely medical and natural sciences and sophistic work (Luraghi 2006, 79; Thomas 2006, 64 and 68).

For instance, there is the already mentioned authorial presence in the narrative, which is a trace of influence of sophistic works (Thomas 2006, 73)³⁶. There are also the comments on his methodology, that are shared with medical writings of that same period (Thomas 2006, 71). More generally contributing to pinpoint the intellectual milieu is the verification of his empirical, "rational" spirit throughout the entire text³⁷ (Cartledge and Greenwood 2002, 361; Thomas 2006, 62), even while speaking of traditions, wonders and religion - which could easily have stood instead as signs of his deep connection with Archaic Greece (Thomas 2006, 61-62).

Herodotus is, actually, one could say, between a past heritage and a present drive for innovation. A particular showcase of this is his speculations on the reasons for human diversity - a theme of great interest for his ancestors, but one that he would take to a whole new level, arranging his own theories (in dept to some of the intellectual developments contemporary to his person), complemented by the detailed descriptions of every group of people he became acquainted with (Thomas 2006, 62, 64-65). Likewise, there is the constant seek for motive behind the actions, that «present a parallel to (...) Homer (...) and (...) the tragedians» (Baragwanath 2008, 5)³⁸.

The meta-discourse that gives shape to the genre is, one could say, meeting his epoch's expectations and influences as well as surpassing/ adding to some of them (Luraghi 2006, 85). That may be why Herodotus makes so many statements on the details grounding his research - he was, truly, drawing borders for something new (Cartledge and Greenwood 2002, 352; Luraghi 2006, 85-86).

Having said that, could it all really be just to cover a forgery, like it was assumed for a while? In view of the most recent works on the matter, it certainly was to inspire credibility, but not one we can judge from our time's parameters; it was a credibility founded on honesty³⁹ and persuasion simultaneously⁴⁰, based on both expected and new devices to construct authority.

³⁶ It can also be ascribed to sophistic influence the immanent tension «between Herodotus' conviction that truth about the past is accessible and worth preserving, and his recognition - doubtless sharpened by the sophists' speculations - that much of importance remains partially concealed. This is very much the case when it comes to questions surrounding human and - even more so - divine motivations. » Baragwanath 2008, 4.

³⁷ «Herodotus' preference for the tangible, the visible, and the empirically verifiable against abstract, 'invisible' speculations, (...) though it should be added that he goes on immediately to attempt his own explanation, admitting that he too has to delve into the realm of 'the invisible' to do so (2.24.1). » Thomas 2006, 62.

³⁸ Herodotus had a very complex view on human actions and interactions: the attention he gives to individual motivation, complemented with cultural and environment influence, is astounding (Thomas 2006, 66, 70-71; Rood 2006, 304). In any case, Herodotus is not a relativist in full sense (Thomas 2006, 70); as the word *histor* also reveals, he is a judge, an arbiter, dedicated to determining who was to blame for a quarrel by examining the customs and laws of a tribe, departing, always, from his own cultural framework (Evans 1968, 16). See also Cartledge and Greenwood 2002, 367.

³⁹ In the sense of assuming his subjectivity as a part of the work (showing the procedures for his investigation, the *step-by-step* of his judgments and considerations...).

Why cite, for example, his informants, his *akoē*? Was Herodotus “naïve” to the point of believing all he heard? And why cite contradictory versions? Could it not be his way of reminding the doubtful nature of the material (Baragwanath 2008, 12)? The social/cultural nature of memory, and, thus, of the knowledge he gathered⁴¹ (Hornblower 2002, 379; Luraghi 2006, 83-84; Luraghi 2007, 143)? Was he not remarking, after all, how History is in fact contested territory⁴² (Baragwanath 2008, 2; Jenkins 2003, xi)?

The case with *Histories* is that Herodotus, voluntarily or not, brought into discussion in his work the problem of provenance of knowledge about the Past (Fowler 1996, 86; Luraghi 2006, 87; Luraghi 2007, 160). That is probably the main reason for the multiplicity of views (and attacks) on his work. The *father* of History launched the discipline with its very own problematic issues, issues that we are still debating today.

All these examinations into Herodotus’ writing serves the purpose of reminding that his accounts may not have been as unsophisticated, thoughtless or immature as one used to believe (Thomas 2006, 73). Understanding Herodotus’ methods and the motives behind their use is not the same as adjudicating the question of his reliability, but it shows, alternatively, how interested was he in giving a critic, thought-through, coherent discourse about what he was narrating (Luraghi 2006, 88).

And what was it, that he was writing about? Until now, it was made a brief overview of some of the issues that can and are being discussed within the Academy regarding the category in which the *Histories* could be integrated in, given the new approaches possible to this source. Now, I would like to mention some of the study perspectives considering the content of Herodotus’ book(s).

While attempting to understand Greco-Persian conflict, Herodotus pays close attention both to Persian customs and the customs of people this empire had succeeded (or not) in conquering, trying to find a reason for that outcome, but also an explanation to general hostility, based on cultural differences (Rood 2006, 290). That was one of the reasons for doubting Herodotus since Ancient times: while his narrative on the war was from the beginning of modern historiography used as a source (whether or not agreeing with it), much like Thucydides’ work, his cultural depictions of the *Other*, however, were taken as a minor, distorted, amusing part, even, of the *Histories*.

An example, probably the most thorough, of a description of a people is surely the case of the Egyptians⁴³. Recurrent topics are clear in this book, as in the others, when it comes to

⁴⁰ The provocation of surprise and wonder or even shock, could very reasonably be leading readers into a process of reflection. The same could be said about the prosecution and defense of celebrated actions. Baragwanath 2008, 16 and 18.

⁴¹ The word « gather » is all the more appropriate considering that his commentary on the subject sounds very much like an ethnographical preoccupation: « Libre à qui trouve de telles choses croyables d’accepter ces récits des Égyptiens; quant à moi, ce que je me propose tout le long de mon histoire est de mettre par écrit, comme je l’ai entendu, ce que disent les uns et les autres. » (2.123) Herodotus 1972, 152.

⁴² That is, « that differing interpretations and explanations of historical events and personalities arise from the perspectives of different individuals or groups. » Baragwanath 2008, 2.

⁴³ « J’en viens maintenant à l’Égypte, dont je parlerai longuement ; car, comparée avec tout autre pays, c’est elle qui renferme le plus de merveilles et qui offre le plus d’ouvrages dépassant ce qu’on en peut dire ; aussi parlerai-je d’elle avec plus de détails. » (2.35) Herodotus 1972, 89.

the description of culture: there are the marvels (*thomata*)⁴⁴, the monuments (*erga*), customs (*nomoi*) (Rood 2006, 291), and other features of the life of peoples, such as material culture (*diaita*) and ambiance or the cultural development of the group (*ēthea*) (Redfield 1985, 98). But Herodotus does not simply mention them as a *guiding book*; he exhibits a critical approach - on his own way undoubtedly - measuring, comparing, translating and evaluating customs (or natural phenomena), usually using techniques such as symmetry and systematic oppositions to organize more conveniently the information for the reader (Redfield 1985, 103). This next citation is a showcase of this matter: «Les Égyptiens, qui vivent sous un climat singulier, au bord d'un fleuve offrant un caractère différent de celui des autres fleuves, ont adopté aussi presque en toutes choses des mœurs et des coutumes à l'inverse des autres hommes. » (2.35.5 ; Herodotus 1972, 89).

Nevertheless, Herodotus never leaves his role of foreigner, i.e. he only «notes particular traits; he is not concerned with the functional, structural, or stylistic coherence of the cultures he describes» (Redfield 1985, 97). As a “tourist”, he collects the difference (and the more curious, the better), he does not delve much into it (unless for macro-approaches, Redfield 1985, 106). But it is through this exercise (comparing and contrasting little details) that he becomes aware of cultural relativism (Redfield 1985, 99).

We can find critical approaches between lands, concerning the communities' memory. For instance, if Egypt seems better (easily) described, during the Scythian *logos* Herodotus puts greater emphasis on the difficulty of gathering information, and the Persians seem to him to have many (the most) contradictory stories about their Past (Luraghi 2007, 152-155). Besides providing his macro-understanding of a trait of these cultures, is he not telling us, once again, of yet another problem of the collection of information about the Past? Indeed, in societies with mainly oral discourses about their Past as a community, our knowledge will be deeply constrained by what (and how) they preserve it (Lloyd 2002, 125; Luraghi 2007, 146 and 150). And for that, as Herodotus realized, there is not much that *opsis*, *gnomē* or *akoē* can do. In this way, the inconsistency of his books, another flaw appointed to his work, is now being discussed as a direct consequence of the material he was using. Far from hiding it, Herodotus clearly shows the stories for what they are - information he gathered (Luraghi 2007, 150), deducted or saw. Rather than making it a poorly fluid narrative, this only enriches the content for the (modern) historian to explore.

Speaking of the “exotic”, as a wanderer, was interpreted and treated by most later historians as a discrepant part of the *Histories*, when compared to the narratives on the

⁴⁴ «A *thōma* may be some aspect of the landscape or a natural peculiarity of a country. (...) Another category of *thōmata* is works of art and monuments. Technical ingenuity is often the admirable quality present in this type of *thōma*; in addition, massive size and great expense seem to be important qualities of these types. Inventions and stratagems which put natural resources to good use or allow an obstacle to be circumvented are another source of wonder. Human beings can arouse wonder for their heroism, audacity, and intelligence. (...) Physical difference can arouse wonder, and so too can biological and ethnographical differences. Observed phenomena which are perceived as being in some way abnormal or ordinarily improbable can be wonders. » Priestley 2014, 55.

«The narration of *thōmata* in the *Histories* seems to function as a consciously rhetorical means of catching and holding the audience's attention. » Priestley 2014, 58.

Greco-Persian War. This was mainly because writing as a traveller was interpreted as a simple, superficial, leisure activity and not a serious enterprise. However, it has now come to be realized that the act of wandering (specifically for Ancient Greeks) could be deeply connected with wisdom, with thought (Redfield 1985, 102), therefore representing quite the opposite of later understandings. Indeed, Herodotus could not resemble an ethnographer⁴⁵, much less on present terms, but he never proposed himself to do that – what he did aim at was to write «a Greek book for Greeks about Greeks and others» (Redfield 1985, 102).

Are these accounts subjective - inevitably; ethnocentric – yes, very (Lloyd 2002, 418; Rood 2006, 298); but is he aware of this? The answer is also affirmative. It is not a coincidence that Herodotus defended Pindar's expression «custom is king of all»⁴⁶ (Lloyd 2002, 418; Rood 2006, 298-299). Furthermore, it is quite significant that he was even impelled to find a cause for the differences between one another, making an elaborate case using environment as the central argument (Dench 2007, 500; Rood 2006, 301-302). Still, even if Herodotus had not been aware of it, it would not be a problem, for really what we are studying is the perspective of a Greek of his own world, and there is much (academic) interest in understanding that (Redfield 1985, 98).

Initially motivated to write about a confrontation, political and cultural, investigating the *Other* soon became Herodotus' predominant narrative. In doing so, «Herodotus (...) invited his Greek audience to think through their own preconceptions» (Rood 2006, 300), to challenge «the Greek/ barbarian distinctions themselves» (Pelling 1997, 58).

Parallel to that, as famously François Hartog would explain it, he was also very concerned with making a *mirror* for the Greeks, a cultural map (Rood 2006, 302), where the definition of the Self had everything to do with the definition of the Other. «Thus cultural relativism becomes ethnocentric and serves to reinforce the tourist's own norms» (Redfield 1985, 100).

If this relationship with other peoples has started to receive much attention, the things Herodotus says in concrete about them are still reluctantly addressed. It is my belief that it is, in part, due to the persistence of the idea that some of it does not match what is known nowadays about these lands. But does it have to be viewed as a problem? Why not attempt to comprehend why was it that way? For example, if historians stress now the remarkable mass of officials there were in Ancient Egypt, why did not Herodotus mention it when speaking of social classes (Lloyd 2002, 422) – when he specifically dedicated so much attention to social organization? And what about the non-existent references to the idea of a divine ideology in Egypt (Lloyd 2002, 427), that could itself be a matter of

⁴⁵ Mainly because his attention is not that of one looking for the universal man, but rather an observer of space and time variations. «That is why Herodotus does not write about his categories, but simply employs them – because he is not trying to state the a priori conditions of all experience, but rather to bring some order into the chaos of his actual experience. » Redfield 1985, 106.

⁴⁶ «If one should make the offer to all mankind and tell them to select the finest *nomoi* from all *nomoi*, after review each would take his own. Nor is it likely that anyone but a madman would think this ridiculous. » (3.38). Redfield 1985, 104.

wonder, since Greeks did not have that concept in their society? Or else the lack of timber in Egypt (Lloyd 2002, 430)?

In the light of what is now known, it is quite understandable that Herodotus spends a lot of time on Egyptian religious matters – not theology, but the practice (Lloyd 2002, 432). It is believed it was an overarching subject in Egyptian society. But Herodotus could have not mentioned it, likewise the examples given before. Was he compelled by the reality on this case? Or is it a question of interest? Or something else? This source as yet to be more explored.

The only truth about historiography, ethnography, or the fields Herodotus seems to have touched, is that they are not *straightfoward* narratives, where the reality is merely *transcribed*. There is always a mediator, with a mind of its own, and a context to which it belongs to. Taking a position like that of 19th century historians might not contribute a lot to the case of this source, because it dismisses such rich details, but neither thus Felix Jacoby's, defending Herodotus' credibility by *patronizing* it at the same time as a *draft* of today's historiography. This text should be accepted for what it is and the researcher should seek to do it with the source's own patterns. That does not necessarily mean to forget our own, mainly because it is impossible, but it means to find a balance between our History and his *Histories*.

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