

What is History?

History in Ancient World

Who are the historians?) identity, biographical details (personal context and historical context), values, philosophy of history

1. Herodotus of Harlicarnassus (ca 484-430BC)

a) Source: *The Histories* - 5th BC, history of the wars between Persia and Greece.

b) Personal Details

- Born in Greek town of Harlicarnassus, borders on Persian empire (modern Bodrum on east coast of Turkey)
- Travelled extensively
- Greeks – a people with shared culture, language, customs. No notion of a Greek 'state', rather individual towns and cities.
- Persian Wars (490-479 BC) and Peloponnesian War (431-404BC)

c) Approach to writing history

- *historia* – 'researches' or 'enquires' – implies intellectual inquiry, knowledge – became 'rational enquiry into the past'
- no archives, methods of research or of communicating the past, no access to works of past generations
- oral sources – Greek oral culture. Only literary models at the time were epic poetry and oral recitation, which both influenced his approach to writing *The Histories*.
- Stories and digressions, that are highly critical of the Greek city-states
- Refers to extensive travel and interview. He names places, individuals – ie, collecting local and oral traditions rather than eyewitness reports
- Compares and contrasts viewpoints as a method for testing veracity
- Hypothesizes to account for the data
- Attempts to distinguish between myth, legend and fact....therefore some critical techniques are used that are recognizable today
- all histories begin with stories about an event, Herodotus unfolds history as a story
- Fabricates witness accounts in order to make elements seem more plausible
- Anachronistic judgements are not important to him
- Uses direct speech as a narrative device – add drama and pace
- Insatiable curiosity – customs, religious practices, attitudes of non-greeks
- Above all, for Herodotus, history involves interpretation. He is well aware of the process of interpretation in investigating history – the reader is clear at all times about what Herodotus is doing. He uses the "I" voice, intervening to tell the reader what his research protocols are, and whether or not a source or a story is true. This is called self-reflexivity by postmodernists

Herodotus of Harlicarnassus, his Researches are here set down to preserve the memory of the past by putting on record the astonishing achievements both of our own and of other peoples; and more particularly, to show how they came into conflict (Book 1.1)

For myself, my duty is to report all that is said; but I am not obliged to believe it all alike – a remark which may be understood to apply to my whole history (Book 7.152)

Many tales without due investigation

After the theft of the statues the Epidaurians ceased to fulfil their undertaking to send an annual tribute to the gods of Athens. The Athenians remonstrated, but to no purpose, for the people of Epidaurus proved that they were in no way in the wrong. They had fulfilled their obligations so long as the statues were in their possession; but now they were gone, the obligation was at an end. Now, the Aeginetans had the statues; so the proper thing was to make the Aeginetans pay. At this, the Athenians sent a demand to Aegina for the return of the statues, but were told in reply that Aegina was not interested in Athens. The Athenians claim that, after they had asked for the statues, they sent a party to Aegina in a single warship, who attempted to bring the statues away, on the ground that, being made of Athenian wood, they were Athenian property. First they tried to wrench them off their pedestals; then, having failed to do so, they made ropes fast to them, and hauled. As they were heaving, there was a clap of thunder and an earthquake, and the ship's company suddenly went mad and began to kill each other, until only one was left, who returned by himself to Phalerum. The Athenian story is, however, contradicted by the Aeginetans, who deny that it was a single warship – they could easily have kept off a single ship, or several, for that matter, even if they had no navy themselves; on the contrary, the Athenians came with a large fleet, and they themselves made no attempt to oppose them. They are not clear as to whether they avoided battle because they acknowledged their inferiority at sea or because they were planning what they then did. In any case, the Athenians landed unopposed and made for the statues; then, having failed to wrench them from their bases, they attached their ropes and began heaving – and continued to heave until an extraordinary thing happened. Personally I do not believe it, though perhaps somebody may – but the story is that each statue fell upon its knees, and in that attitude both have remained ever since. The Aeginetans go on to affirm that as soon as they got wind of the intended attack from Athens, they sought aid from Argos, so that when the Athenians landed, Argive reinforcements were already on the spot to oppose them; they had slipped across from Epidaurus, fell upon the Athenians before they knew they were there, and cut off their retreat to their ships. It was at that moment that the earthquake occurred, and

d) What are the aims and purposes of history?

- to preserve the memory of the past by putting down on record the achievements both of our own and of other peoples...
- it is not possible to find 'truth' in the past

2. Thucydides (c. 460-400 BC)

a) Source : *The History of the Peloponnesian War* – outlines the causes and course of the war between Athens and Sparta, and their allies ca 431-404BC.

- earliest example of a 'research' approach to writing history
- based on oral evidence from contemporary sources
- content is divided into 8 books: 1-4 deal with the first 10 years of the war (The Archidamean War) between Athens and Sparta until the Peace of Nikias. 5-6 deals with the next 10 years that describe the escalating involvement of the various allies and Athenian attempts to capture Sicily. Book 8 looks at Sparta's occupation of Athenian territory.

b) Personal Details

- revealed in *The History of the Pelop. War*.
- Athenian citizen of Thracian descent. A man of property (including owning gold mines in Thrace) and a man of influence
- Started writing about the first 10 years of the war and then caught (but survived) the great plague that devastated Athens
- Military experience – elected as one of the 10 Generals
- Given the command of the Athenian navy based in Thrace – but failed and was exiled as punishment
- During exile, which was towards the end of the war, Thucydides had time and space to consider the events from the perspective of the enemy as well.
- Died shortly after the end of the war

This history of this period also has been written by the same Thucydides, an Athenian, keeping to the order of events as they happened by summers and winters, down to the time when the Spartans and their allies put an end to the empire Athens and occupied the Long Walls and Piraeus. By then the war had lasted although twenty-seven years ...

...I lived through the whole of it, being of an age to understand what was happening, and I put my mind to the subject so as to get an accurate view of it. It happened, too, that I was banished from my country for twenty years after my command at Amphipolis; I saw what was being done on both sides, particularly on the Peloponnesian side, because of my exile, and this leisure gave me rather exceptional facilities for looking into things. I shall now, therefore, go on to describe the disputes that took place after the twenty years' war, the breach of the treaty, and the warfare which came afterwards.

Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War* Book 5.26-27

c) Approach to writing history

- Argued that his approach to writing history was novel and superior to that of previous authors – Homer and Herodotus who wrote myth, popular tradition and geography
- Deliberately leaves out any ‘romantic’ elements, which is meant to emphasise the ‘historical’ nature of his approach
- Approach deliberately modeled on the Hippocratic School of medicine, which emphasized the importance of careful observation, maintenance of records and data in order to build up a prognosis. The idea here was that knowledge of the process could serve to inform decisions later.
- His approach was ‘scientific’ and his treatment of the past indicated his awareness of the problems of deficient evidence, and of bias. He noted the need to thoroughly check reports of witnesses, and only then could he be confident of distinguishing truth from falsehood
- He worked towards producing a valid and reliable historical account. He believed that his history was based upon a scientifically derived model of human behaviour.
- Thucydides believed that he could convey to posterity an account of how things were.
- Firmly believed in the attainability of historical truth. His descriptions and analysis, his refusal to speculate, his careful evaluation of evidence and witnesses, and his belief in universal laws of human behaviour, all derived from models of contemporary science, gave him the confidence to aspire to historical truth.
- Thucydides, unlike his predecessors was the first to write something, which we identify as history : **an account of the actions of people of the past, based on his interpretation of the available evidence.**
- There is an important literary dimension in his approach to writing about the past. Inserting invented speeches, was not unheard of in the ancient world. But he was different in that he tells us it is *how* he writes the invented speeches that is important. When it is possible he keeps as closely to the overall sense of the ideas related.
- He uses speeches to explain the motives and ambitions of individuals and states, but also to draw out important themes.
- Above all, Thucydides avoids interpretation, and seeks to show the facts as they are
- It is possible to find a ‘truth’ in the past

In investigating past history, and in forming the conclusions which I have formed, it must be admitted that one cannot rely on every detail which has come down to us by way of tradition. People are inclined to accept all stories of ancient times in an uncritical way – even when these stories concern their own native countries. (Book 1.20)

...The rest of the Hellenes too, make many incorrect assumptions not only about the dimly remembered past, but also about contemporary history. ...Most people in fact, will not take trouble in finding out the truth, but are much more inclined to accept the first story they hear. However, I do not think that one will be far wrong in accepting the

conclusions I have reached from the evidence which I have put forward. It is better evidence than the poets, who exaggerate the importance of their themes, or of the prose chroniclers, who are less interested in telling the truth than in catching the attention of their public, whose authorities cannot be checked, and whose subject-matter, owing to the passage of time, is mostly lost in the unreliable streams of mythology. We may claim instead to have used only the plainest evidence and to have reached conclusions which are reasonably accurate, considering that we have been dealing with ancient history.
(Book 1.21-22)

In this history I have made use of set speeches some of which were delivered just before and others during the war. I have found it difficult to remember the precise words used in the speeches which I listened to myself and my various informants have experienced the same difficulty; so my method has been which keeping as closely as possible to the general sense of the words that were actually used, to make the speakers say what, in my opinion, was called for by each situation.

And with regard to my factual reporting of the events of the war I have made it a principle not to write down the first story that came my way, and not even to be guided by my own general impressions; either I was present myself at the events which I have described or else I heard of them from eye-witnesses whose reports I have checked with as much thoroughness as possible. Not that even so the truth was easy to discover; some eye-witnesses give different accounts of the same events, speaking out of partiality for one side or the other or else from imperfect memories.

...And it may well be that my history will seem less easy to read because of the absence in it of a romantic element. It will be enough for me, however, if these words of mine are judged useful by those who want to understand clearly the events which happened in the past and which will, at some time or other and in much the same ways, be repeated in the future. My work is not a piece of writing designed to meet the taste of an immediate public, but was done to last for ever.

c) What are the aims and purposes of history?

There are three overarching 'aims' that can be identified in the histories from the ancient world:

1. To bring to light the past as it was

- History is the study of the past, and all that the historian has to do, is to find out what happened in the past, and accurately record it. "Laying out the matter as it is" - Lucian of Samosata 2nd century AD.
- The important idea underlying this approach to writing history, was the belief that there is a past reality or truth, waiting to be discovered and described. The historian just has to investigate, to clear away confusion, and bring the past to light.

- This aim has a strong scientific element to it – just as the scientist strives towards a direct understanding of an external natural reality, the historian aims to give an account of that truth, free from any personal bias. This underlying scientific approach to writing history has continued down to the present, eg. J. B. Bury (1902) considered that ‘the truth’ about the past constitutes the historian’s attainable objective (cf. below).

Example: Thucydides

- The ‘simple’ recording of what happened in the past was considered to be a virtue – at the price of poetic reputation or imagination; “*..the absence in it of a romantic element*” (cf. Book I.22 – source handout page 2). This suspicion of imagination continued across the centuries
- Thucydides intended to tell the truth about the Peloponnesian War, because he considered it important to do so. The truth was important, because he felt that it revealed certain things about human nature in times of crisis – vital knowledge for those who held positions of power;

“..if it be judged useful by those enquirers who desire an exact knowledge of the past as an aid to the interpretation of the future, which in the course of human things must resemble if it does not reflect it, I shall be content. In conclusion I have written my work, not as an essay which is to win the applause of the moment, but as a possession for all time” (Book I.i)

- Thucydides clearly sets out his aims – to investigate the causes of the war between Athens and Sparta and their allies, to investigate why influential people behaved in the ways that they did, and to investigate the impact of the war on communities. Eg. the impact of the war and revolution on the city of Corcyra (cf. source handout page 3); why Athens decided to attack the island of Melos and commit one of the few examples of ‘genocide’ in the ancient world.

Thucydides the Athenian wrote the history of the war fought between Athens and Sparta, beginning the account at the very outbreak of the war, in the belief that it was going to be a great war and more worth writing about than any of those which had taken place in the past. My belief was based on the fact that the two sides were at the very height of their power and preparedness, and I saw too, that the rest of the Hellenic world was committed to one side or the other; even those who were not immediately engaged were deliberating on the course which they were to take later. This was the greatest disturbance in the history of the Hellenes, affecting also a large part of the non-hellenic world, and indeed, I might almost say, the whole of mankind. For though I have found it impossible, because of the remoteness of time, to acquire a really precise knowledge of the distant past or even of the history preceding our own period, yet, after looking back

into it as far as I can, all the evidence leads me to conclude that these periods were not great periods either in warfare or in anything else. (Book 1.i)

- Eg. Within the history of *The Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides aims to give his audience a micro-view of the war. In writing about the plague in 430BC, he is simply attempting to give a detailed description of what actually happened – something that he feels competent to do so because he has observed other sufferers, but as also having personally experienced the disease. The symptoms are carefully described for each day – first, the physical symptoms as a doctor might do. But then, he pans out from this view and investigates the moral and psychological breakdown of Athens. He looks at the sickness on a collective scale – and then a general human scale - people's hopelessness and despair in the face of disease, which struck at random, and for which there seemed to be no cure.

2. Moral teaching

- There is a strong element of moral teaching in history writing in antiquity.

Example – Thucydides

- Underlying Thucydides' aim that his history will be of lasting value is the idea that it contains a moral lesson of universal applicability. In antiquity there is the assumption that there was a moral order of which people should be aware. Disaster would strike if that moral order was forgotten or ignored. For example, the demoralization and ultimate defeat of Athens by Sparta at the end of the Peloponnesian War, was their just retribution for ignoring moral order during the war.

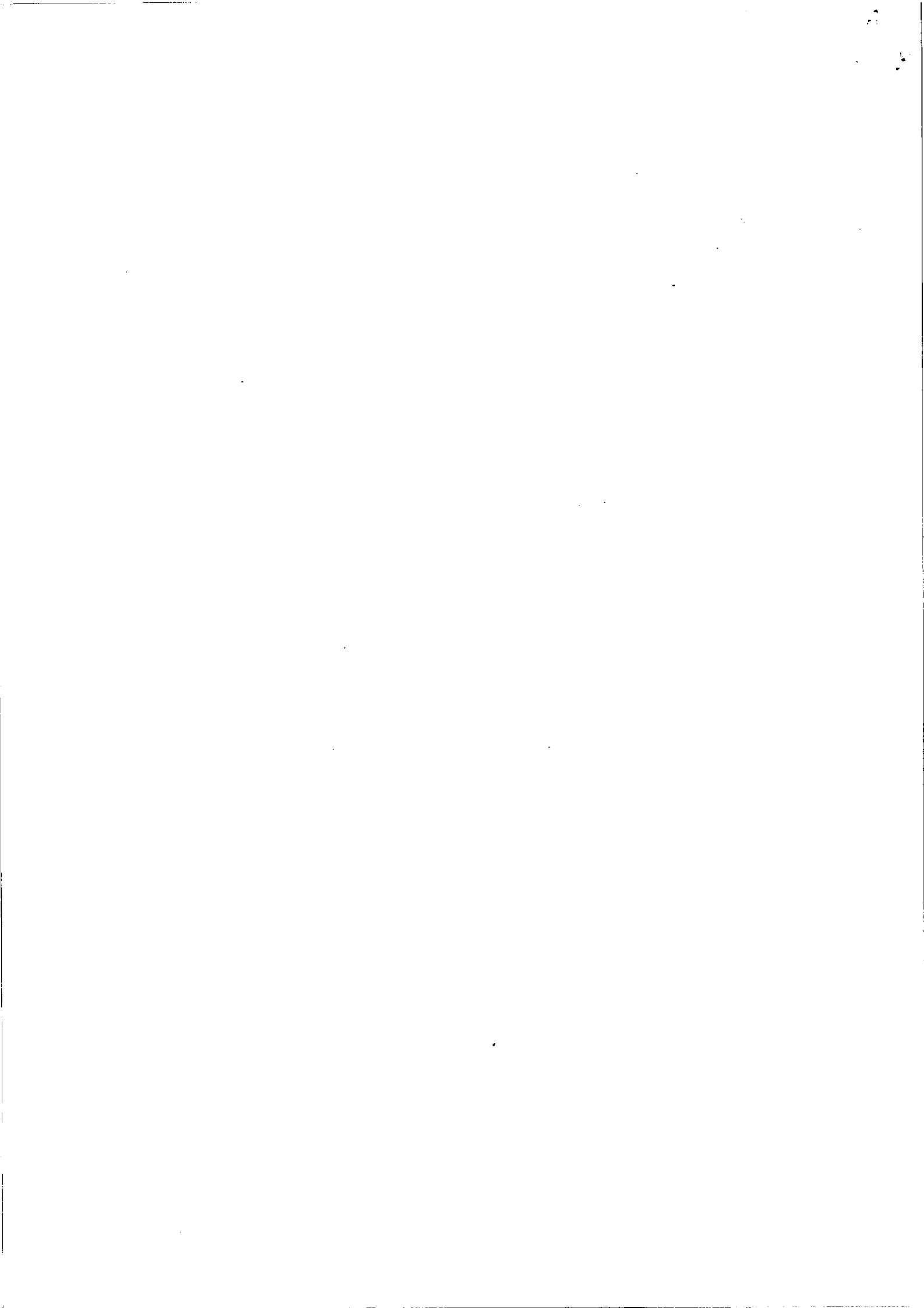
d) How has history been constructed over time?

Through these three examples it is possible to reduce what we know into a few general points:

- **The availability of historical evidence** – Thucydides was a contemporary witness, who, he says, had access to current data;
- **Contexts of historians:** belonged to the educated elite

e) What are the historical debates?

- use of evidence – the evidence speaks for itself
- telling the truth about the past
- the past as it was



CHAPTER 2

HERODOTUS

Who was Herodotus?

Herodotus was a Greek historian of the 5th century BC and he is generally credited with the title 'the father of history', a title given him by the Roman writer and politician, Cicero. Herodotus lived through tumultuous times in the Greek world, stretching from the invasion of Greece by the Persian Empire to the glory days of Athens to the Peloponnesian War between the Greek states.

- Herodotus was born in 484 BC at Halicarnassus in Caria, which was situated in the south western corner of Asia Minor. This is modern Bodrum, in the south western corner of Turkey.
- Herodotus was the son of Lyxes and Dryo, who was an 'upper class' Halicarnassian. He had a brother called Theodorus. The fact that Herodotus was literate suggests a family of some affluence and education. There is a tradition that he was a cousin of the earlier epic poet, Panyasis.
- The story goes that he moved to Samos to escape the tyrant of Halicarnassus, Lygdamis in c. 464 BC as it was later suggested that he had been involved in a coup attempt against the tyrant. He returned to help drive the tyrant out of the city sometime before 454 BC.
- As a young man Herodotus travelled widely. He visited the Aegean islands, the coast of Asia and spent much time in Egypt. He then visited Palestine and Phoenecia, and then ventured as far east as Babylon and Susa in the Persian Empire. Herodotus also travelled through the Hellespont (Dardanelles) to the Black Sea and visited all the lands around its rim (see the map 2.1). After this he spent time in Athens.
- From Athens he moved to Thurii in Italy where some of his fellow citizens had established a colony in 444 BC. It is believed he wrote his great work here.
- There is no evidence that Herodotus ever married or had any children.
- According to Suidas, he died and was eventually buried in Thurii in c 418 BC. However, Herodotus had returned to Athens in 431-30 and may have died of the plague ravaging the city at that time.
- The date of Herodotus' death is subject to conjecture. The best that be said is that he died between 429 and 413 BC:
 - In *The Histories* he refers to the execution of two Spartans in Athens, which Thucydides tells us was about 429 BC.
 - Herodotus also states that Decelaea, near Athens, was never plundered by the Spartans, which it was in 413 BC.

The times of Herodotus

THE PERSIAN WARS

From the 490s to the 470s BC, the Greek city states faced the prospect of invasion and conquest by the Persian Empire. Much of Herodotus' work is concerned with telling this story. He recognised the enormous importance of this conflict. It was not simply a military confrontation between states, an

Extension History: the historians

ever-present feature of the ancient world. This was a clash of civilisations. Had the Persians been successful, it could be argued that the future of western civilisation would have been vastly different!

- 499: The Ionian Greeks rebel against their Persian rulers.
- 494: The Persian king, Darius, finally suppresses the rebellion and vows vengeance on Athens and Eretria, two Greek city states which had helped the Ionian rebels.
- 492: An invading Persian fleet is shipwrecked off the coast of Mt Athos in northern Greece.
- 490: The Persian army of Darius is defeated at the Battle of Marathon by a largely Athenian force under the guidance of Miltiades.
- 485: Xerxes becomes Persian king following the death of Darius and reconfirms his father's desire for vengeance.
- 482: The Greek statesman Themistocles persuades his fellow Athenians to spend the wealth of the new silver mines at Laurium on ships.
- 481: At the Congress of Corinth the Greek city states agree to unite under the leadership of Sparta in the face of the coming Persian invasion.
- 480: The Persian army of Xerxes defeats a small Spartan led force at Thermopylae but the Persian fleet suffers major damage at Artemesium. The Athenians evacuate to Salamis, leaving their city to be razed by the Persian invasion force. The Persian fleet is decisively defeated by the Themistocles led navy in the Battle of Salamis. Xerxes returns to Persia.
- 479: The Persians are defeated by the Spartan-led Greek forces at Plataea. The invasion is over.
- 479: Greek naval forces pursue the Persians who are decisively defeated at the Battle of Mycale. The liberation of Greek Asia Minor is achieved.

THE DELIAN LEAGUE AND THE ATHENIAN EMPIRE

After Mycale, Athens became the leader of the Greek states and formed the Delian League, an alliance created as a guarantee against any possible future Persian reinvasion. However, by the mid-450s BC, it had evolved into an Athenian dominated empire where the city states were at the behest of Athens. Athens came to use the League for its purposes. States were forbidden to leave, others were forced to join. Athens came to dominate the entire Aegean.

- 470s: Athens conquers or forces into the Delian League Eion, Scyros and Carystus.
- 466: The Persians are defeated at the Battle of the Eurymedon River.
- 460s: The islands of Naxos and Thasos are forced to stay in the Delian League.
At this time Athens was trying to develop a land empire which went well beyond the original aims of the Delian League.
- 459: Athens sends troops to Egypt.
- 457: War between Athens and Aegina.
- 454: The treasury of the Delian League is moved to Athens.
- 449: Peace with Persia is achieved in the Peace of Callias. This of course would make the Delian League redundant.
- 447: There is growing disillusionment with Athenian rule which leads to outbreaks of revolts which the Athenians crush ruthlessly.
- 440-39: The revolt in Samos is suppressed.

By the 430s BC, Athens totally dominates its naval empire. It provides protection, but demands total obedience, taxes and troops. Any signs of independence are immediately destroyed. Several subject allies now look to Sparta as a possible path to freedom. Military conflict had developed by the early mid-450s as Athens tried to develop a land empire. Peace was achieved in 446 but by the late 430s disagreements were arising which would lead to war between Athens and Sparta.

SPARTAN-ATHENIAN RELATIONS

481: Athens accepts Spartan military and naval leadership in the defence of Greece against the Persians.

480-79: The Greeks achieve victory against the Persians.

Sparta is embarrassed by the behaviour of its king Pausanias in Asia Minor.

470s: Sparta returns to its traditional isolationist policy and leaves Athens to lead the Greek states.

464: A helot revolt at Mt Ithome endangers the Spartan state.

Athenian statesman Cimon offers help but is humiliated when he is rejected by the Spartans. Cimon is soon ostracised from Athens.

450s: War between the Athenian Empire and the Peloponnesian states backed by Sparta. Athens loses much of its land empire.

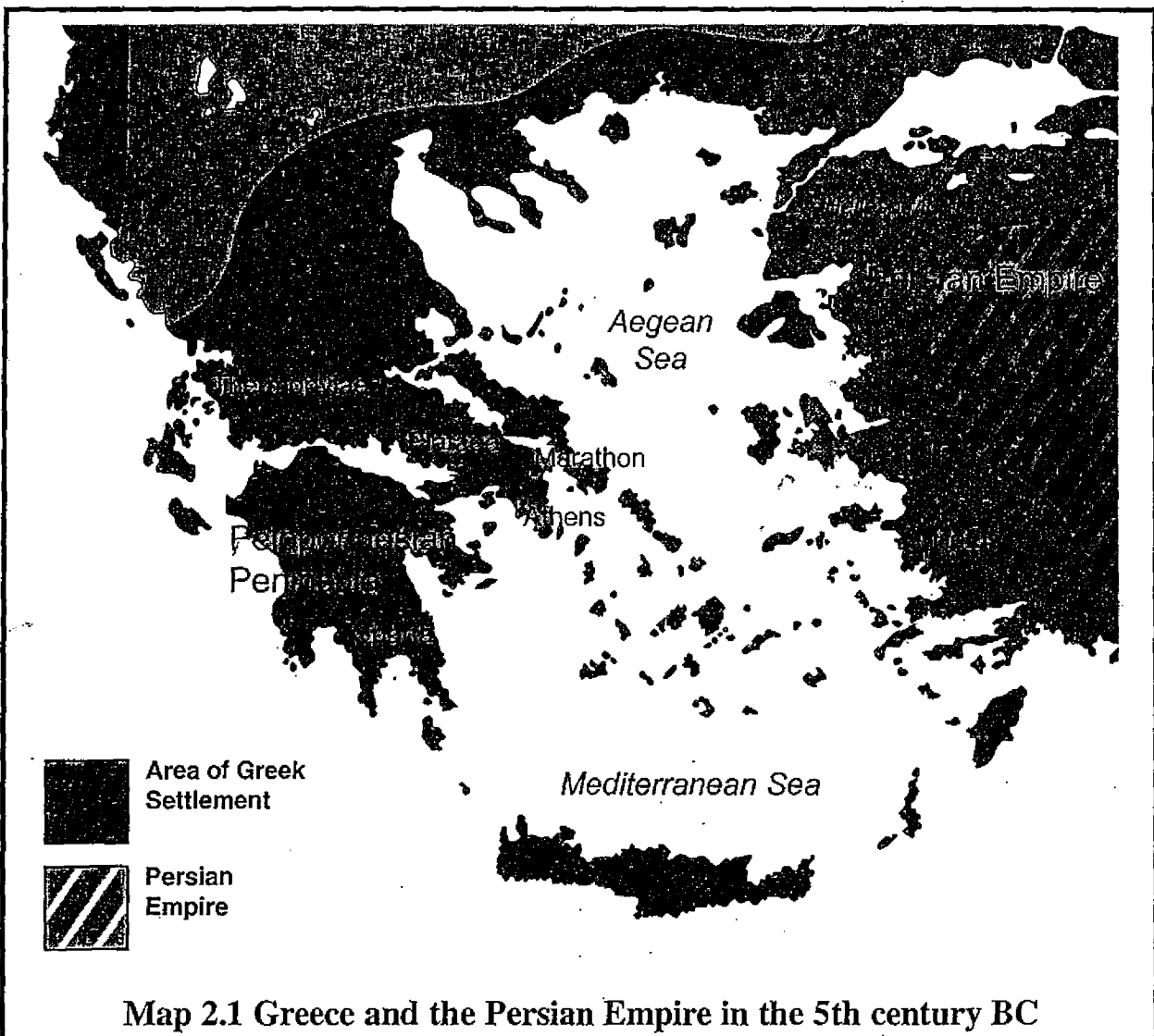
446: Signing of the Thirty-Year Truce between Athens and Sparta.

440s/ Under Pericles' leadership, Athens becomes the greatest of the Greek states:

- 430s - political reforms turn Athens into a democracy
- Athens' wealth grows; it dominates the key trading routes
- the city of Athens is expanded and beautified

430s: Conflicts arise between Athens and members of the Peloponnesian League, in particular Corinth.

431: The Peloponnesian War breaks out between Athens and Sparta.



The works of Herodotus

Herodotus is remembered for his one great work, *The Histories*. The Italian classicist Silvana Cagnazzi suggests that each book can be subdivided into three 'logoi' and that this is how Herodotus would have first 'published' his work. Cagnazzi says it would have taken about three to four hours to recite a logoi.

Herodotus' work includes the following:

Part 1: The Rise of the Persian Empire (Books I-V)

- The section deals with the growth of the Persian Empire from the mid-6th century BC to about 500 BC.
- It tells the story of Cyrus the Great, Cambyses and Darius.
- Herodotus digresses extensively into studies of ethnology. These include detailed accounts of the Egyptians, Babylonians, Persians and Scythians.
- He concludes this section with an account of the Persian conquest of the north Aegean coast and the suppression of Greek revolts in the Straits region.
- Book I:
 - Lydia to the Persian conquest; Cyrus and Asia
- Book II and III (to part 66)
 - Cambyses and Egypt; Polycrates of Samos; the death of Cambyses
- Book III (from part 67) to Book V (part 27)
 - Darius, the empire, the Mediterranean and Europe; Darius and the west
- Book IV
 - Scythia, Africa
- Book V (parts 1- 27)
 - ethnology of the Balkans; Persian conquest of the north Aegean

Part 2: Greece and the Persian Wars (Books V-IX)

- Book V (from part 28) to Book VI (part 42)
 - the Ionian Revolt
- Book VI (from part 43)
 - the renewed Persian advance into Europe; the Battle of Marathon
 - Miltiades, but nothing on Athens between 489 and 481 BC
- Book VII (parts 1-174)
 - preparations for the next Persian invasion; the advance into Europe
 - the lack of Greek unity and the fall of Thessaly
- Book VII (from part 175) to Book VIII (part 26)
 - Battles of Thermopylae and Artemesium
- Book VIII (from part 27 to part 99)
 - the Persian advance into Athens; the Battle of Salamis
- Book VIII (part 100-144)
 - the withdrawal of Xerxes; Mardonius in Europe, the diplomacy of 480-79
- Book IX
 - the Battle of Plataea; the Battle of Mycale; the new revolt in Ionia

Herodotus and his history

WHAT WAS THE PURPOSE OF HISTORY FOR HERODOTUS?

Herodotus opens *The Histories* with the following statement:

Herodotus of Halicarnassus, his Researches are here set down to preserve the memory of the past by putting on record the astonishing achievements both of our own and of other peoples; and more particularly, to show how they came into conflict.

(*Histories*, Book I, 1)



Herodotus' purpose is at one level 'commemorative', that is he wants those who fought and died for Greece to be properly remembered.

Herodotus sees the conflict as one: between Europe and Asia
 between civilisation and barbarism
 between freedom and slavery

He believes this conflict has deep roots and so he seeks to trace back the conflict's origins to its mythical past. The overall theme of *The Histories* became the expansion of the Achaemenid (Persian) Empire between 550 and 479BC. This meant that his digressions into a discussion of topography and ethnology became integrated parts of a larger whole work.

HERODOTUS AND HOMER

Herodotus' opening was not unusual. Homer's *Iliad* begins in much the same way. The difference with Herodotus is that he, unlike Homer, did not seek the aid of 'the goddess' to tell his story. However, historians are influenced by who writes before them and there are traces of Homeric style in Herodotus:

- Like Homer he gives comprehensive lists of troops who fought.
- Even the story of the Spartans and Persians fighting about the body of Leonidas at Thermopylae (480) recalls a scene from Homer where the Greeks and Trojans fight around the body of Patroclus.
- Like Homer, Herodotus interrupts his narrative to digress about customs and geography.
- Both Homer and Herodotus deal with the enemies of the Greeks with some impartiality; the Greeks may be the heroes but the Trojans and the Persians do not come over as villains.

However, there are major differences between Homer and Herodotus:

- Herodotus was obviously not writing in a poetic style but in prose.
- Homer was concerned with the distant past. The events he was describing occurred 400 years earlier; Herodotus' story relates events in living memory. He claims to have interviewed survivors from the Battle of Marathon (490 BC).

- Even more important was the fact that Herodotus was a researcher and an empiricist. Much of what Herodotus wrote was the result of his own travels, observations and inquiries. This was new. Homer, and the writers of the Bible, never worried about issues such as sources and bias. However, after Herodotus, no self-respecting historian could ever ignore this aspect of the historian's work.

It is not going too far to say that Herodotus' contribution to writing was **revolutionary**. *He invented a new genre: history*. This was the result of his writing in prose and basing his work on solid research. Herodotus states that his work is *historie*, the Ionic dialect word for the Greek work *historia*, and from this of course we derive the term history. However, during the time of Herodotus, the term refers more to the process of research.

Some 'thoughts' on Herodotus

Herodotus makes much of his research and his efforts to find the truth. He travelled widely, interviewed possibly hundreds of people and eagerly sought two or three versions of events. He tried to get the Persian and Greek account of incidents.

Herodotus not only displays thoroughness and impartiality but a willingness to reveal his own doubts. If he has heard several versions of a story, he is happy to provide them all, and invites readers (or listeners) to make up their own minds. This critical attitude to sources is quite a departure for Greek writers of the time.

However, some critics have suggested that Herodotus is simply 'too good to be true':

- There are inaccuracies and instances where he did not really visit a place he claims to have.
- To some critics Herodotus is not so much the 'father of history' as the 'father of lies'. He is mocked because of his credulity. This is probably unfair.
- Some of the customs that he described seem quite simply unbelievable yet Herodotus relates what he has heard or seen and does so in a very non-judgmental manner.
- Herodotus is the epitome of tolerance and hates intolerance.
- Some of his contemporary critics attacked him for being too even-handed, and accused him of being *philobarbaros* or pro-barbarian.
- Also there is danger of being *anachronistic* in criticising Herodotus' techniques. We should not judge him by modern standards (or should we?). Herodotus' audience – and his *Histories* were meant to be recited – expected to be told tales. This, plus Herodotus' aim to memorialise heroes' great deeds, surely explains appearances of the fantastic in his work. However, it does not lessen that work as 'history'.

He does get some of his topography quite wrong. He is not perfect and readers of Herodotus have to make their own judgment about this aspect of his work. In the 16th century, European explorers returned with similarly bizarre stories about other peoples, yet nobody doubts their major discoveries. Herodotus may not be perfect, but there is much evidence to suggest that he got a lot of his history right:

- For example, his description of Darius' coup is supported by the inscription found in the town of Behistun.
- Details about Persian administration are supported in Persian documents such as the Daiva inscription.

- Herodotus was an educated man from a well to do family and so he would be familiar with the literature of his times. This is seen where he quotes other writers such as Homer and Hesiod. Marnie Hughes-Warrington makes this point below:

When one considers Herodotus' accounts of giant ants, the gathering of the gum ledanon from the beards of billy goats, sheep with giant tails and flying snakes, it is not hard to see why many people think of him as a credulous writer who had a taste for the fantastic. In a number of places, however, Herodotus shows us that he did not accept everything that he was told. Sometimes he casts doubt on reports of an incident, indicates his scepticism about particular claims, reports what he heard without believing it himself and dismisses accounts outright.

(Hughes-Warrington, M., *Fifty Key Thinkers on History*, Routledge, London, 2001, p. 160)

Herodotus' explanation of the causes of the war between Greece and Persia goes far deeper than the traditional 'action and reaction' idea which the epic poets of the time went in for.

- He recognises that the root cause of the conflict is imperialism, which is ably shown as he relates the expansion of the Persian Empire.
- *This is new.* He is providing an abstract cause for a complex historical development; the tradition had been to blame everything on the gods.
- In Herodotus the gods do not directly determine events.
- However, it will take another generation before a Greek historian completely removes divine control of the affairs of men.

This is not to say that supernatural control, and evidence of the concern of the divine powers for human affairs, have been entirely excluded by Herodotus; oracles and other superhuman manifestations frequently appear, and on the cosmic level an ill-defined Fate lies in the background. But no longer do particular spears strike or miss particular targets at the whim of individual deities, as in the epic, nor are favourite warriors spirited to safety in a cloud of temporary invisibility. Such 'explanations' of historical events simply will not do for the critical spirit of this first of historians.

(Waters, K.H., *Herodotus the Historian: His Problems, Methods and Originality*, Norman, 1985

- quoted in <http://luna.cas.usf.edu/~murray/classes/hdt-sem/waters0.1.htm>)

An alternative view suggests that Herodotus in fact sees events being determined by the actions of individuals.

Herodotus tends to see motivation in historical events as stemming largely from personal desires and intentions on the part of individuals, rather than from social, demographic or more broadly political influences on events which constitute modern historians' explanations of the world. It would be an oversimplification to claim that Herodotus is wrong and naïve in his analysis. Instead we should see his explanations as signs of how the world looked in the fifth century BC. It was a world dominated by reciprocity, and in particular the desire for revenge.

(Sharrock, A., and Ash, R., *Fifty Key Classical Authors*, Routledge, London, 2002, pp. 63-64)

Herodotus is affected by who he is, where he is from and by his subject. In other words he is affected by his *context*.

- His history is based on the heroes of his society, mainly aristocrats and the rich, as only these people could influence society.
- Many of his stories are from great families about great families. Thus we tend to get a history through the perspective of 5th century elites. This is, of course, probably the stratum of society from which he himself came.

Extension History: the historians

- Herodotus is Atheno-centric; he is motivated by a wonder at the power of Greek unity but with Athens at the forefront. His pride in the efforts of Athens is central to his analysis of the defeat of Persia. Herodotus was writing at a time of worsening Atheno-Spartan relations. This might 'perhaps' be a factor in his playing up the Athenian role in the Persian defeat.

Herodotus fails to escape the context of his times in another way:

- The Greeks believed that the gods would tempt mortals into arrogance, into the crime of hubris. Even the greatest of kings could be brought down if he committed the crime of hubris.
- Herodotus' story of the fate of the Persian king Cambyses (529-22) is a case in point. Cambyses' behaviour in Egypt had all the hallmarks of hubris. Herodotus tells us that Cambyses executes his brother, has incest with his sisters, burns Egyptian noblemen alive, attacks the holy Apis bull and desecrates Egyptian tombs and mummies.
- The death of Cambyses is presented as divine punishment for his hubris:
...(Cambyses) leapt upon his horse, meaning to march at speed to his capital and attack the disloyal magos. But as he was spinning into the saddle, the cap fell of the sheath of his sword, exposing the blade, which pierced his thigh – just in the spot where he had previously struck Apis the sacred Egyptian bull.

(Histories, Book III, 64)

Herodotus' treatment of Cambyses' hubris not only reflects his typically Greek attitudes to such behaviour but also illustrates the strong philosophical angle to his work.

- Herodotus argues that cities and empires rise and fall and that nothing remains the same for ever.
- The rich, the powerful, the great will fall while the poor, the weak and the small will rise.
- This was to be the fate of the Lydian king Croesus, and of Xerxes himself.
- This notion of hubris leading to nemesis was typical of much of the dramatic literature of Herodotus' times, including that of Sophocles and Aeschylus. Aeschylus' play *The Persians*, which Herodotus would certainly have known, deals with its theme in the Persian court itself.

Consciously or not, all historians impose some sort of story or meaning on to the mass of data which they have at their disposal. Herodotus, and all the Greek and Roman historians who came after him, understood this well and looked to history for more than just a narration of events. They expected the historian, through his narrative, to teach or to explore wider issues, be they religious, political or moral.

(Duff, Timothy, *The Greek and Roman Historians*, 2003, p. 24)

However, Xerxes' decision to invade Greece and bring ruin on himself and his nation, was not simply divine retribution for his hubris. Herodotus shows that Xerxes' decision was a practical, political one based on a desire to right what he saw as past wrongs and to make practical gains for the empire. This is Herodotus the historian at work, not Herodotus the mythmaker.

Herodotus is clearly proud of his Greek heritage and of the seemingly miraculous victory of Greece over Persia.

- There had to be a reason for this Greek success.
- The answer can be seen in Herodotus' decision to spend so much of his work dealing with the cultures, societies and religions of the non-Greek peoples. By detailing the

ways of non-Greeks and their servility to Persia, the success of the Greeks is held in even starker contrast.

- The Greeks called nobody master. Herodotus is keen to emphasise throughout his work the difference between Greek freedom and Persian autocracy. This idea frequently appears, often in the form of fabricated discussions, for example the one between Xerxes and the former Spartan king, Demaratus, in Book VII.

Another view of Herodotus' intent comes from the English historian, Charles Fornara. Fornara suggests that Herodotus was deeply troubled by the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War. Persia's arrogance and mistreatment of its subjects had led to its ultimate demise. Though Herodotus did not live to see the end of the Peloponnesian War, indeed perhaps not even the end of the first Archidamian phase of the war, perhaps he could see history's lesson he was teaching about to unfold for Athens.

Let us think ourselves back to the Archidamian War and ask what our train of thought would be after reading that last portion about Athens at Sestos... In one quick and comprehensive mental stride we would cover the intervening period – think of Athens' league, retaliatory war against Persia, the reduction of rebellious subjects and transition to empire, and finally, the outbreak of another war begun for the sake of freedom. And so we come full circle, sharing with Herodotus some of his sadness and pessimism.

(Fornara, C, *Herodotus, an interpretive essay*, 1971

- quoted in <http://www.ucd.ie/classics/95/Derow95.html>)

Thinking about Herodotus

