

David W Fletcher, May 2001

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## CLASSICAL HISTORIANS: A LOOK AT HERODOTUS AND LIVY

Herodotus and Livy without doubt write for different worlds with special concerns and definite agendas. Herodotus addresses the accelerated demise of Greek culture, the reaction to change by conservatives, and the awareness of the populace at large of the certainty and necessity of change. Livy writes to appease the Stoic sense of Roman hegemony in a cosmos dominated by the power of authority, law, and order (for example, the *pax Romana*), but he must focus his attention on the creeping gap between traditionalism, on the one hand, and more radical challenges to conservative stability by reformers and revolutionaries, on the other hand. Both Herodotus and Livy feel a pressing need to invoke certain elements of the status quo in order to appease the voices that fight change. And both Herodotus and Livy acquiesce to the powerful cultural crosscurrents that so often disrupt economic, political, and social life and create a feeling of uneasiness for the “maintainers” of a society but what is bread and butter for the “movers” and “shakers” of the times.

In his own way, each classical historian captures the spirit of the living dynamic that results from interaction with other humans who have like needs but have distinct ways of discovering and meeting those needs through giving, sifting, taking, or transforming. In order to cope with the reality of powerful cultural undercurrents, Herodotus and Livy develop a new appreciation for the influence of “outsiders” on what might be characterized as a “closed” or “impenetrable” society. Each author, therefore, should be seen not only as a “child of his times” but also as a creative influence whereby a new vision of past, present, and the future is molded

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and voiced. This new outlook or eschatological vision is tempered by both Herodotus and Livy through a comparative reflection on foundational historic epochs.

Both Herodotus and Livy shape, with significant impact, the beliefs, feelings, and thoughts of their contemporaries. Each influences the actions of his fellows. Thus, the work of history runs its course not just in the academic expansion of conceptualizations about old things *passee*. Rather, the work of history creates a new context for the existential realization of the happenings of the moment, namely, that history and its interpretation works itself out in the actions of men and women in the here and now. Human “doing” or “acting” is based on one’s conceptualization of the present as it relates to the past and as it is perceived to effect the future. Without any perception of the past, this triad (i.e., past, present, future) of human consciousness would be incomplete and, most likely, psychotic. As with all writers of history, Herodotus and Livy give some sense or some meaning for their “now,” and they do so by realizing that the present is wrapped up in the past, as much as it derives from a common wellspring of knowledge and perceptions.

They write history, though, not without bias and not without subjective perspective but with both partiality and prejudice and each in his own way. Sometimes that history seems haphazard, a result of little reflection, meager research, and “off the cuff.” At other times, the written text oozes with copious detail, the product of extensive research and painstaking fact finding. The admixture of this kind of history—the unevenness of its accuracy and the inconsistency of its record—does not concern the authors of these historical prototypes, for each man writes in that ancient milieu without drawing from the so-called advantage of post-

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Renaissance scientific method. While to the modern mind their methods seem brutal, harsh, archaic, and even arcane, each represents his own epochal culture as he gives the very best for his times. This does not minimize the importance, or even the accuracy, of what Herodotus and Livy produce, but it is to contextualize each author to appreciate each one's work in its proper setting with the appropriate parameters and the guidelines needed to analyze and understand. To read with wisdom, consequently, demands knowing where each author has been, what he has observed, what perspective he entertains, for what purpose he wrote, and in what ways he was limited. These questions will be raised in the following survey of each of these classical authors.

Herodotus grew up in his hometown Halicarnassus, a Greek city in the region of Caria in southwest Asia Minor. Halicarnassus, a coastal city that lay along a lovely bay on a peninsula that jutted into the south Aegean toward the Sporades, overlooked the important sea route between the isle of Cos and the Asian mainland. The city sported an Ionian culture in classical times, and it served as the center of a minor dynasty that included Artemisia I, princess of Caria, who joined the Persians against the Greeks at Salamis in 480 B.C. The Delian League situated an Athenian naval station at Halicarnassus after the revolt in 412 B.C., and by about 370 B.C. Mausolus, satrap of Caria, used the city as a base from which to consolidate his hegemony over native villages. After this, great public works, such as an enclosed harbor, dockyards, civic buildings, and a great funerary temple of the dynasty (i.e., the Mausoleum), made Halicarnassus one of the spectacular cities of the ancient world. In 334 B.C., Alexander the Great labored

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vigorously in his siege of the city, and after Alexander's conquest it reverted to rule by

Antigonus, Lysimachus, the Ptolomies, and finally to the Romans in 130 B.C.<sup>1</sup>

A son of Lyxes and the nephew of epic poet Panyassis, Herodotus lived between two major conflicts of the Greeks: the second invasion of Hellas by the Persians and the Peloponnesian War—the struggle between rivals Athens and Sparta for mastery over Greece. Born about 480 B.C.,<sup>2</sup> Herodotus reaped the benefit of a rich personal experience that drew not only from the intermingling of great powers as they vied for territorial control of the Aegean world but also from the resultant international political and social intersect. In addition, Herodotus traveled extensively during his fifty or so years,<sup>3</sup> and by this expansion of his *Weltanschauung*, or his vision of *he oikoumene*, Herodotus compensated for any early influence of a somewhat inconspicuous Halicarnassus and its rigid adherence to local customs and ways.

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<sup>1</sup>John Manuel Cook, "Halicarnassus," *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 486.

<sup>2</sup>The date of his birth, ca. 484 B.C., has been debated, since later biographers perhaps just added forty years to an important event in Herodotus' life when he joined the Athenian colony at Thurii, ca. 444 B.C. Because he recorded no events past 430 B.C., supposedly he died in Thurii sometime prior to 420 B.C. See John Linton Myres, "Herodotus," *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 508.

<sup>3</sup>Herodotus showed personal acquaintance with Samos, Athens, southern Italy, Egypt, especially Elephantine, Gaza, Tyre, possibly Babylon, Olbia in Scythia, and the northern Aegean from Bosphorus to Thasos. *Ibid.*

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True, this “father of history,” an appellation called into question by some,<sup>4</sup> lived on the “edges of the great Eastern empires of Persia and Egypt, as well as the borders of Greece . . . a cultural and linguistic crossroads.”<sup>5</sup> But the fact of Halicarnassus as a crossroads did not negate its function as a border—in some measure remote and removed from the mainstream, not necessarily by geography alone, but also by attitudes and habits of an established and persistent tradition. Drawing from enormous experiential knowledge of a variety of cultures, Herodotus did not hesitate to examine and expose such rampant Greek paternalism.

While borrowing from the heritage of Greek bards, such as Homer and Hesiod, Herodotus broke significantly from that tradition to chart a new genre in narrative discourse and formal writing. He did not simply rehearse the myths and stories of the poets without some sense of critical investigation. This Herodotus stated clearly from the outset, since he wrote, “This is the publication of the research of Herodotus of Halicarnassus, so that the actions of people shall not fade with time, so that the great and admirable monuments produced by both Greeks and barbarians shall not go unrenowned, and, among other things, to set forth the reasons why they waged war on each other.”<sup>6</sup> Here, at the beginning of his work, Herodotus affirmed the process

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<sup>4</sup>See J. A. S. Evans, “Father of History or Father of Lies: The Reputation of Herodotus,” in Walter Blanco and Jennifer T. Roberts, eds., *Herodotus: The Histories (New Translation, Selections, Backgrounds, Commentaries)*, tr. Walter Blanco (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992), 368-377. Because travelogues often quote his pithy observations, another appellation for Herodotus very well could be “Father of Quotations.” Melissa Shales, ed., et al., *Insight Guide: Turkey*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (Singapore: APA Publications, 1999), 207.

<sup>5</sup>Blanco and Roberts, eds., *Herodotus: The Histories*, xi.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid*, 3-4.

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by which he ascertained his information. He set forth his *historie*, his “research” or “inquiry,” which more than likely indicated his reliance on learning about events and places from the traditions passed down from previous generations through a process of oral transmission. Herodotus possibly gleaned from certain written sources, such as the work of the Miletian Hecataeus, the memoirs of Dicaeus, an Athenian exile in Persia, the *logographoi* or court speeches from Charon of Lampsacus and Xanthus of Lydia, and a supposed repository of recorded oracles. But indications of such literary dependencies remained tenuous, at best, even to the most scrupulous ancient critics, so these connections cannot be certain, especially since literary texts were either nonexistent or fragmentary.

As he related the outcome of his inquiries, Herodotus chronicled the hostilities between the grand eastern empire of Persia and the western federation steered by the powerful city-states Athens and Sparta. This momentous struggle between the East and the West presaged not only the perpetual discord of distinct world civilizations, but also, in Herodotus’ view, “a conflict between a despotic monarchy ruled by a magnificent autocrat whose aim is the enslavement of the whole world, and a jury-rigged confederation of states determined to remain free.”<sup>7</sup> The native son of Halicarnassus elaborated this early political science subplot in his series of nine *biblioï* or books, which not only valued the global savvy of peoples other than the Greeks, notably the Persians, but his ecumenical outlook questioned the legitimacy of the Great War itself, an inquiry of chief concern for Herodotus:

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., xiii.

Blame for the clash of Persians with Greeks is put on Croesus, whose headstrong attack on Cyrus ruined Lydia (1.6). The story of that “middle kingdom” (1.7-94) is interrupted characteristically by a pair of digressions (1.59-68), explaining why neither Athens nor Sparta helped Croesus. The rise of the Medes, their subjection by Cyrus, and a sketch of him and his Persians (1.95-140) lead to his conquest of the Asiatic Greeks (1.141-177). The story of the Empire under Cyrus, Cambyses, and Darius (1.178 to 5.27) includes a long account of Egypt (book 2), formally motivated by Cambyses’ invasion of the country. The accession and reforms of Darius (3.61-87, 150-160) are interleaved with his first oversea success, against Polycrates of Samos (3.39-60; 120-149), and followed by pendent narratives of his aggressions in Thrace and Scythia (4.1-144; 5.1-27) and in Libya (4.145-205). After all this retrospect comes the Ionic Revolt (5.28-38), its suppression (5.97–6.42), and the consequent Marathon campaign (6.94-120), similarly alternated with events in Greece, involving Sparta (5.39-54; 6.51-84) and Athens (5.55-96; 6.85-93, 121-40) in resistance to Persia. In books 7, 8, 9 the accession of Xerxes and his choice between policies (7.1-19) lead to pendent narratives of preparation, Persian (7.20-131) and Greek (7.131-175). Then the sea-fight at Artemisium (7.175-195) and the land-battle at Thermopylae (7.196-239), with their sequels (8.1-23, 24-39), prepare for the crucial struggle at Salamis (8.40-112) and its aftermath, the return of Xerxes (8.113-132), and the winter parleys (8.133-144). Finally, the land-battle of Plataea (9.1-89) and the naval operations at Mycale (9.90-106) are the counterpart of Artemisium and Thermopylae.<sup>8</sup>

At Plataea and Mycale, Herodotus ended his narrative with the salient demoralization of the Persians, their defeat by the Greeks in decisive land and naval battles, and then the degrading mutilation of Xerxes’ sister-in-law by his jealous wife. This last *logos*<sup>9</sup> from Herodotus concluded his inquiry of *ta meta ta Medika*, as it well prepared the way for subsequent historians, such as Thucydides, to pick up and continue the saga of Orient versus West. In terms of chronology, Herodotus’ composition spanned roughly the period from the reign of Croesus, the

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<sup>8</sup>Myres, “Herodotus,” *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 508.

<sup>9</sup>Herodotus systematically divided his *histories* into this or that *logos* about the various subjects he writes about rather than a clumsy partition into nine “Muses” according to some later redaction fancy.

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last king of Lydia (ca. 560-546 B.C.), until the formation of the great Grecian alliance, the Delian League (ca. 478-477 B.C.), or the time of the wars between Greeks and Persians.<sup>10</sup>

#### The Greek Wars With Persia

Persian conquest of Asia Minor	546 B.C.
Ionian Rebellion	499-494 B.C.
Battle of Lade and destruction of Miletus	494 B.C.
Battle of Marathon	490 B.C.
Invasion of Xerxes	480 B.C.
Battles of Thermopylae, Artemisium, and Salamis	480 B.C.
Battles of Plataea and Mycale	479 B.C.
Delian League founded	478-477 B.C.

Within this broad framework, Herodotus expounds his story deliberately, if not magnificently, and this he attains by use of the bard's artistic skill, the skill of one who can tell a story and keep the listener's attention rapt. After all, Herodotus comes from a family that boasts of poets in their midst, so he does not fail to utilize lyric license in his literary compilation. For example, he uses double standard when dismissing the Trojans' kidnapping of Medea, "the Greeks had given neither damages nor the girl when they had been asked, and now they wanted damages to be given to them by others!" (4).<sup>11</sup> He tells variant stories about the origin of the conflict between the Persians and the Greeks, "that is how the Persians say it happened, and they

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<sup>10</sup>D. Brendan Nagle, *The Ancient World: A Social and Cultural History*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1999), 122.

<sup>11</sup>Page numbers in parentheses in the following sections come from Blanco and Roberts, eds., *Herodotus: The Histories*.

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trace the beginning of their hatred of the Greeks to the conquest of Troy . . . the Phoenicians, however, do not agree with the Persians . . . that is what the Persians and the Phoenicians say”

(5). But then Herodotus gives his own opinion, “I am not going to say that these events happened one way or the other. Rather, I will point out the man who I know for a fact began the wrongdoing against the Greeks [i.e., Croesus], and then proceed with my story . . .” (5). In such fashion, he carefully distinguishes sources of knowledge but produces a work that is composite and complex, since his sources really defy tracking. In other words, since ancient historians did not use footnotes and did not, in any formal manner, reference materials that they possibly used, it becomes quite impossible to differentiate oral traditions from any written sources.

But ancient authors do on occasion use formal “indicators” in the text itself and thereby hint at the possibility of source identification. Herodotus is no different. When he tells of the sickness of Alyattes and the subsequent consultation of Delphi’s oracle, he concludes, “I know this is how it happened because I heard it from the Delphians myself” (9). This suggests that Herodotus in this instance uses an oral report. But immediately he continues, “The Milesians add this to the story . . . this is what the Milesians say happened next . . .” (9). While this could be just another oral report, the fact remains that Herodotus is not clear concerning his sources. But exceptions to this ambiguity sometimes do occur in the text, since Herodotus hints at the existence of written documents.

For example, when Croesus struggled for an answer to the death of Atys, his son, he sat idle for two years, and then decided to test the oracles. So the king sent his messengers from Lydia to the seers at Delphi, Abae, Phocis, Dodona, Amphiaraus, Trophonius, Branchidae in

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Milesia, and even Ammon in Libya. The king's messengers had specific instructions to "test the oracles . . . [on] the hundredth day . . . consult the oracle, asking what Croesus, the son of Alyattes and king of the Lydians, happened to be doing. They should *write down* whatever prophecies each of the oracles gave and then bring them back to [Croesus]" (17). Herodotus remarks, parenthetically, that "no one can say what the other oracles prophesied, but at Delphi, as soon as the Lydians entered the temple to consult the god and ask the question they had been ordered to ask, the Pythian priestess, speaking in hexameters, said . . .," and then he quotes the prophecy. Herodotus adds, "The Lydians *wrote down* the prophecy of the priestess and set off for Sardis. When all the others who had been sent abroad were present with their prophecies, Croesus *unfolded* each of the *writing tablets* and read over the contents. None of them pleased him, but when he heard the one from Delphi, he immediately accepted it and said a prayer" (17).

This story from Herodotus, at the very least, reveals the existence of written oracles and the use of one of those oracles, the one from Delphi, by the "researcher" in his masterful compilation. The pragmatic value of such an objective medium like a written oracle is quite apparent, as it serves both administrative and legitimizing purposes. Having been written down and so recorded, theoretically, the prophecy is delivered intact from the oracle at Delphi to the king, that is, without alteration and accurately as uttered at Delphi. Through writing, the oracle is safeguarded in this process of administration, but the writing also serves a legitimizing function as well with the proper sign or seal of the message's true origin which is the Delphic soothsayer. These practical concerns offer some evidence as to Herodotus' written resources, yet "speaking in hexameters" could also be a characteristic of transmission via an oral process. But it seems

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more likely that Herodotus had some sort of written evidence before him, either a fragment or compilation of ancient oracles that had been preserved on parchments, papyri, or clay tablets. It must be added, though, that such is by no means conclusive, as Herodotus could still be drawing from what had been written, lost, and then preserved in the oral stories that he gleaned from bards in the different places he visited.

One certainty that knows no ambiguity to the Greek mind, however, Herodotus exploits to the fullest, and that is the overwhelming umbrella of control etched into the human condition by the powers that rule over humanity. In accordance with Greek resolve, and perhaps a sprinkling of determinism, fate remains the arbiter of personal destiny through the hand of the deity. Herodotus, typical for his time, does not fail to miss this important design of the governing, celestial powers. For instance, Croesus tells Adrastus, who accidentally killed the king's son, "You are not the cause of my troubles; you just unwillingly brought them about. It was some god, who long ago foretold what the future would be" (17). The modern mind might repulse such a naive view of a nebulous, otherworldly, and otherwise uninvolved being (i.e., "some god"), but not so Herodotus. The deity fittingly is named by terms that speak of a warm, even loving, relationship. Zeus, who is called "the Purifier," is also invoked as "the God of Hospitality" and "the God of Friendship." This is all the more amazing, since the context for the origin of these appellatives is a context of dire tragedy, the death of the king's son.

This usual domination of humans by their deities finds exploitation in various ways, but none is so pervasive as the ethical imperative that demands fulfillment in sundry moral obligations. Concerning this ethical imperative that seems to come from some sort of mythical

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relationship between humans and deities, Herodotus does not demur. Early in his inquiries, he defines through the words of Solon, a legendary and wise Athenian reformer of the sixth century B.C., the limits of time and life. Both time and life are gifts from the deity to humans, but realistically both remain products of “pure chance” (i.e., fate). “When you ask me about human affairs, you ask someone who knows how jealous and provocative god is. In the fullness of time, a man must see many things he doesn’t want to see, and endure many things he doesn’t want to endure. . . . [But] from one day to the next absolutely nothing happens the same way twice. So, humans are the creatures of pure chance” (13). This dismal ontological viewpoint leads Herodotus, again through the voice of Solon, to salvage some reason or sense for human existence, that takes the philosophic bard to what would later become a Stoic doctrine—the way of a principled life that is built on moral advice or instruction. But what are humans to do since their lot is so unfortunate, especially in light of the fact that the difference between two extreme results of the so-called disciplined life—the rich or lucky man versus the poor or unlucky man—can only be determined after the end of one’s life and not before?<sup>12</sup> The answer for Herodotus, the Greeks, and most other ancients is clear.

As a result of this mixed up, topsy-turvy, and unpredictable state of human affairs, the seer plays a potent role. In myriad situations, over and over, the characters in the stories of

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<sup>12</sup>Anasis, the Egyptian pharaoh from ca. 570-525 B.C., expresses his moral opinion on “good luck” as follows: “It is usually pleasing to find out that a dear friend and ally is prospering, but your immense good luck does not please me, because I know that god is a jealous god. Now, I prefer that I and those I care about succeed in some things and fail in others, thus passing our lives with changing fortunes rather than with complete success. I have never heard tell of any totally lucky man who didn’t finally end up in utter misery” (109).

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Herodotus appeal to the oracle for heavenly guidance. This is the classic antidote administered by ancient thinkers to counteract the poison of teleological uncertainty in the human predicament and thus prevent human failure. In Herodotus, the ailing *psuche-soma* (literally, spirit / body, cf. psychosomatic) of earth's *homo sapiens* receives a full dosage of this *theotes* medicine that features help from above. Driven by "a divine impulse," Amphilytus, the Acarnanian fortune-teller, encourages Pisistratus, the famous Athenian tyrant, to make good his attack (23). The Pythian priestess at Delphi influences Lycurgus, the selfless Spartan lawgiver, toward beneficent government (23). So much did the ambassadors of Argos trust in oracular guidance that they preceded their diplomatic efforts by a consultation with the Delphic priestess, even after "six thousand Argives had just been killed by the Lacedaemonians" in order to force Argos compliance with Delian League objectives against Persia (181).

But the oracle often gives out ambiguous messages, kind of a schizophrenic unveiling, that mimics the conflict inherent in the Greek pantheon. For example, Eetion, king of Corinth and son of Echeocrates from Petra, inquires of the Pythian priestess and receives a mixed blessing or "a doubled-edged prophecy" for his son, Cypselus (142-143). Of the message to the Spartans concerning their desire to conquer Arcadia—"I will give you foot-tapped Tegea to dance on, and her fair plain to measure with the surveyor's line"—Herodotus himself labels this "a deceptive oracle" (24). This is because the end result—namely, the Tegeans captured some of the Spartans and forced on them the work of measuring their plain with surveyor's lines—fulfilled the literal meaning of the message uttered by the oracle, but the intent varied dramatically from that originally understood by the Spartans. Another typical ambiguity arises from places in different

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countries or regions with the same name, such as Agbatana (111). Likewise, the response from Athens to a particular utterance illustrates the indefiniteness of the oracle's meaning about the mode of salvation from the Persian attackers—"a wall of wood to be alone uncaptured, a boon to you and to your children" (179). As if to assist the fulfillment of this oracle, the Athenians debate the proper understanding of the "wall of wood." Was it the thorn bush wall that surrounded the Acropolis, or was it a reference to ships? Themistocles, an audacious Athenian general, rightly chooses the latter meaning and encourages the inhabitants to prepare for a naval battle.

Croesus experiences the same sort of problem in interpreting the oracle that swayed his decision to wage war on Persia, an unfortunate and unsuccessful military debacle. Afterwards, he sends his Lydian delegation to Delphi to lay fetters at the temple's threshold, no doubt as a symbol of the "firstfruits" reaped by the god, and then to ask "whether the god was not ashamed to have egged Croesus on with prophesies to make war on Persia when that meant that the power of Croesus would be destroyed . . . [and] whether it was customary for Greek gods to be so ungrateful" (34). The quip reply of the priestess reminds the embassy of the oracle's limits, "Even a god cannot avoid what has been foreordained . . . he [Croesus] could not get around the Fates," and this is followed by a lengthy explanation of Croesus' peculiar circumstance. As he is supposed to do, Croesus takes it all in stride, so that, when the oracle's answer comes back to the king at Sardis, "he heard it, and acknowledged that the fault was his and not the god's" (35). Even the king, who shares an important link with deities, as is typical of ancient oriental kings

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who stand in the place of and represent the gods to the people, defers and submits his will to the “divine impulse.”

But even though the “divine impulse” may be presumed sacrosanct, and thereby inviolable, there can still be bad dreams<sup>13</sup> like the “dream vision,” or the “death riddle,” of Hipparchus, son of Pisistratus. In his dream, he saw a tall, handsome man who stood in front of him and said, “Lion! suffer the insufferable in your suffering heart; no one fails to pay the fine for his injustice” (130). That very day, Hipparchus sought an interpretation for his dream, but then was killed during a procession by Aristogeiton and Harmodius of the Athenian Gephyraean family, who felt their conspiracy against the tyrant Hippias had been betrayed. Similarly, belief in the “divine impulse” can be rattled by a fear of omens, such as snakes (29), a mare that foaled a rabbit (173), or a “mule [born] with two sets of genitals, male and female” (173). But the power of the oracle lies not in an admission of its limitations or a realization of its drawbacks. The energy of the foretelling resides in the demonstration of its fulfillment especially in spite of insurmountable odds.

The potency of the seer’s message rests in the strength of the miracle that is believed or perceived to have happened subsequent to and usually understood as a result of the humanly transmitted divine communicate. But the utterance in its original context is one matter, and the after-the-fact synthesized construct of teleological necessity, by which human reliance on the

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<sup>13</sup>Herodotus, with what reads like a modern psychological twist, gives his thoughts on dreams through Artabanus, the uncle and counselor of the Persian king Xerxes. He says, “Dreams don’t come from god . . . the dream visions that orbit our minds usually come from what we have been thinking about during the day . . .” (162).

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voice of the oracle is both validated and verified, is quite another issue. So why is it wise for humans to hear, heed, and obey the words of the seers? In its most simplest classical expression, it is precisely because it works—*deus ex machina*!

For example, in order to avoid a fiery conflagration by his Persian captors, Croesus shouts an invocation to Apollo, by which “he appealed to the god with tears in his eyes, and then, suddenly, in a clear and windless sky, storm clouds gathered and burst and extinguished the fire with the most savage rain” (33). At the advice of Anasis, the Egyptian pharaoh, Polycrates, the ruler of the isle of Samos about 540-522 B.C., decides to cast his most precious possession—an emerald and gold signet ring—into the sea that is a place “where no man can ever get to it again.” Five or six days later, a fisherman who admires Polycrates brings him a beautiful, huge fish. When the servants of Polycrates cut it open, they find the signet ring in its guts. Polycrates “realized that this was the work of god,” and he sends word about what happened to Anasis in a papyrus letter who concludes that “it was impossible for one man to save another from what had to be, and that Polycrates—so lucky in every way—was not destined to come to a happy end when he even found the things he threw away” (109-110).

An unexpected event, the neighing of the king’s stallion at the same moment as “thunder and lightning in a perfectly clear sky,” accompanies the confirmation of Darius as king, “as if by some covenant,” adds Herodotus (120). But according to the “father of history,” the Persians tell a variant version of Darius’ rise to fame that involves trickery by the shrewd groom Oebanes—“that he rubbed the mare’s vagina with his hand, which he then kept hidden in his pants, [so] as the horses were about to be released at sunrise, Oebanes pulled his hand out of his

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pants and brought it up to the nostrils of the horse [i.e., the stallion], who began to shout and neigh as soon as he recognized the smell” (120). But note the reserve in Herodotus’ assessment of a fierce storm that threatened the Greek naval advance at Chalcis, in Euboea, “During a storm that lasted three whole days, the naval commanders became afraid that the Thessalians would hit them when they were down, so they threw a high barricade made of ship’s wreckage around their position. Finally, on the fourth day, the Magi calmed the wind after propitiating it with incantations and offerings and after performing sacrifices, as well, to Thetis and the other Nereids—*either that, or the wind just died down by itself*” (188). So while *deus ex machina* seems to be the rule, there are exceptions to be noted.

While this reliance on the interworkings between deity and humanity provide a major contextual framework for Herodotus’ inquiries, his masterpiece overflows with information, technique, and good humor. He offers significant information, such as the origin of different peoples (20, 79, 120), geographical designators (i.e., the Halys River, 26-27; for Egypt, 76-77; for Persia and Libya, 124-125; cf. 184, 190), military tactics (66, 108), technology (28, 167-168), innovation (59), and intelligence (180). There are political observations (36, 137), religious rituals (48, 57, 63, 94), festivals (52), sexual customs (49, 91), and moral taboos (50; but cf. the custom of exposing children, 41-42, and the death penalty for “sacrificing an uncertified bull,” 87). Herodotus mentions personal dress (67), the background of Cyrus (34), the Greeks borrowing from the Egyptians (91), respect for the elderly (98), and the identification of farmers and nomads (even before anthropology, 91). He includes sacred animals (95-97), methods of

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embalming (100), pest control (102), building materials (103), risk management (171), catastrophic events (i.e., earthquake, 149), even “world war” (172).

Herodotus shows his literacy craft with various conventional techniques, like effective use of dialogue (20; cf. the four dialects of Ionia, 51), irony (33, 112), literary transition (36, 50), rhetoric (215), and summary statements (60, 62, 85, 175). The artful historian makes judicious use of examples to bolster his argument (66), parenthetical interpretations (40), eyewitness accounts (82), and written records (175). He is careful to discredit (62) or limit the scope of (174) his sources, as well as properly crediting the same (73, 75, 106, especially Egyptian sources). He uses a logical reasoning process (79) to boldly assert his own beliefs (107) as he appeals to the rational arguments of others, notably in his use of speeches (112, 115, 157). He even, at one point, relies on a typical ancient formula of ethical conditions that precede blessings versus curses—“if you do this, then . . . but if you do not do this, then . . .” (112).

Further, Herodotus livens up the narrative by his interjection of good humor such as poking fun (37, 69), but note the fickleness of Xerxes (170) and his “tongue in cheek” attitude to the truthfulness of oracles, “When it comes to oracles, I can’t argue that they aren’t true. I certainly wouldn’t try to discredit them when they speak clearly—not when I look at something like this. . . . In the face of such a clear statement from Bacis, I myself would not dare to impugn oracles, and I do not approve when others do it” (220).

But like any researcher who attempts to elucidate meaning for the present from history, Herodotus falls into a few pitfalls. These could be categorized broadly as errors based on exaggeration (perhaps a literary device for effect, but nonetheless misleading if not pointed out

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by the author), the handing down of fictitious myth, geographical inaccuracies, and prejudice.

There are symbolic exaggerations (32; cf. 54) that include the incredible logistics needed to support Xerxes' army (although Herodotus admits a major problem with this, 186-187), overstatements concerning the feast of Dionysus (190), and the inflation of numbers (sometimes with symbolic meaning, sometimes not) such as the "sacrifice of one thousand cattle" (170; cf. 176). And, an important problem arises from the assessment of the accuracy of written records for speeches. How are these speeches preserved? Should it be assumed that speeches are passed on from the bards verbatim, or does the compiler of historical speech alter them "as necessary" to fit the situation (112, 117, 141)? Herodotus himself recognizes the problem when he says, "Speeches were made which some Greeks find impossible to believe—but they were made, all right" (117).

Herodotus fails of verisimilitude when he preserves myths (44), dubious tales (45; cf. the tale about "hare" surgery, 45!), fables (75, 138), magic tricks (188), dreams that guide and instruct the king (although this is common in ancient literature, 161), and incredible practices (such as cannibalism, 121). There are other negatives, and noteworthy are the geographical inaccuracies (but contrariwise, note the excellent description of the topography of the Black Sea, 70) and Herodotus' own admission to limits in his geographical knowledge (126). Herodotus also proves himself a "child of his environment" when he stoops to caricature (32), depreciates Lydia (35), paints Persia as pro-Lyidian (71), chides Greek understandings (89), and portrays Egyptians as paternalistic (101). But these flaws do not detract from a wonderful product, as

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Herodotus blends together a rich tapestry of political, social, and religious snapshots from his Mediterranean world. Thus ends the analysis of Herodotus.

As for Livy—which is the abbreviated version of his complete name, Titus Livius—he grew up in northern Italy at Patavium (Padua) during the height of the old Venetian town’s glory and prosperity. Little is preserved about his life that spanned the years from his birth around 60 B.C. until his death about A.D. 15. Later writers such as Eusebius and Jerome presumed that Livy felt the heavy influence of strict Italian morality. Perhaps their reading of Livy’s work produced this opinion, since the prolific historian<sup>14</sup> consistently uses the technique of moral lesson to argue his point about whatever event or person he is discussing. If this judgment of later historiographers is true, then Livy very well might have been deeply affected by a conservative moralistic environment in Patavium. But this in no way discredits the genius of Livy’s vivid historical reconstructions that are spiced with “the Isocratean canons of brevity, economy, and verisimilitude, [along] with the devices of literary elaboration, characterizing speeches, and dramatic technique.”<sup>15</sup>

The scope of Livy’s *ab urbe condita libri* reaches from the beginnings of the city to the Gallic sack of Rome (books 1-5), then to the start of the Punic Wars (books 5-15), then the First Punic War (books 16-20), the Second Punic War (books 21-30), the Macedonian and Syrian Wars (books 31-45), and so forth. “As the work grew under his hand the pentad and decade

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<sup>14</sup>Livy wrote 142 books on the history of Rome but only thirty-five have been preserved.

<sup>15</sup>Alexander Hugh McDonald, “Livius,” *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 615.

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arrangement had to be modified. The destruction of Carthage appeared in book 51, Ti[berias] Gracchus in 57, the defeat of the Cimbri in 68, the opening of the Social War in 71, Marius' death in 80, Sulla's death in 90, Caesar's consulship in 103, Pharsalus in 111, Caesar's death in 116, Actium in 133, the death of Drusus (9 B.C.) in 142. Books 109-116 were entitled *belli civilis libri*.”<sup>16</sup> The entire work thus covers the time from the founding of Rome or 753 B.C. (i.e., the traditional date) until about five years before the death of Augustus or A.D. 10.

This undertaking by Livy was massive. He never would have completed the project without financial support from Emperor Augustus that freed him to work solely on research and writing. Unfortunately, only thirty-five books survive (1-10, 21-45). For these books, the Latin text has the support of a mere handful of manuscripts. But the story about Rome fascinated readers then, as it does now, with perhaps the first five books of Livy being the most popular: Rome under the Kings (Book One), The Beginnings of the Republic (Book Two), The Patricians at Bay (Book Three), War and Politics (Book Four), and The Capture of Rome (Book Five).<sup>17</sup> Here ends the quick summary of Livy.

When compared with Herodotus, Livy reads somber and weighty, just as Herodotus reads fluid and lucid. Herodotus teases and cajoles, but Livy warns and instructs. Herodotus fleshes out the response of the gods, but Livy bones up the need for human achievement and endeavor. He Paduan seems more logical and less likely to chase after information from a whole host of

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 614. The Roman numerals have been changed to Arabic numbers.

<sup>17</sup>Livy, *The Early History of Rome*, tr. Aubrey de Selincourt (paperback reprint, New York: Penguin, 1971), 5.

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sources (even conflicting ones), but he loses the flavor of spontaneity that fills every page of the Ionian master's work. Both authors fail to identify clearly their sources, just as both authors have difficulty with certain historical inaccuracies (i.e., a lack of critical method), literary devices such as speeches, and a sense of complete objectivity in the description of important events.

While Herodotus writes to his Greek audience and Livy to his Roman courtiers, the former appeals to the high heavens in order to save the Greeks, but the latter beckons to the highest nature of humans (i.e., ethical, rational action based on philosophic thought) in order to lift up the Romans to the high heavens. Each challenges the conventional wisdom of his day, and each writer reacts vigorously to the changes that bombard society. Both write an indispensable word to their worlds—worlds that struggle against cultural and social upheavals imposed on them by growing cosmopolitanism. In this sense, both Herodotus and Livy assert their historical expertise to keep their peers contemporary or “up with the times.” In the spirit of Herodotus, I think, and this is only my opinion, that both do a very good job, that is, if you contextualize each of the writers properly. But this is my judgment, and I know that others think differently.

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