

Apr 25th, 9:00 AM - 12:00 PM

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Poetry to Prose: The Influence of Herodotus on Written History

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28 March 2022

Abstract

In his book, *The Histories*, Herodotus of Halicarnassus expertly displayed his inquiries into the cultures and conflicts that transformed the Mediterranean world during the Greco-Persian Wars of the fifth century BCE. By writing his narrative in prose, citing his work, and providing cultural reasoning for past events, Herodotus earned himself the nicknames “father of history” and “father of comparative ethnography,” but his inclusion of fables also labeled him the “father of lies.” A historian named Thucydides eventually refined the historical genre to focus on politics without the inclusion of myths, narrowing the discipline of history for another thousand years. In fixing Herodotus’ mistakes, Thucydides also highlighted them, paving the way for future historians to devalue Herodotus’ writing. Famously, Cicero says “even in Herodotus, the father of Greek history... we find fables scarcely less numerous than those which appear in the works of the poets.” This paper explores whether or not Herodotus is deserving of these titles, ultimately arguing that despite Herodotus’ use of fables, his influence has outlasted his critics.

Introduction

Perhaps the most influential written Greek history is *The Histories* by Herodotus of Halicarnassus. The books allow us to construct a timeline of the Greco-Persian Wars. This fact, combined with modern archaeological technology that confirms or denies many of Herodotus' stories, helps us piece together our species' ancient history, one that is filled with blood, glory, and honor. Although Herodotus' *Histories* speaks of glory in a way that is reminiscent of Homer, he moves away from the practices of writing down old, orally transmitted stories reminiscent of predecessors and contemporaries. Instead, Herodotus defines eyewitness testimony, hearsay evidence, and tradition in a way that distinguishes reliable sources from myths, lies, and nonsense. He was certainly not the first person to attempt to explain the whole of the world in which he lived; geographers had done this well before his time.¹ However, in writing his narrative in prose,² citing his work, and providing cultural and historical reasoning for events, Herodotus created a new literary genre that encouraged future historians to understand and accept cultural differences, to make connections across space and time, and most importantly, to ask themselves *why* past events took place.

Who Was The Father of History?

Herodotus is often credited with being the first historian, although he certainly wasn't the last. His work has been translated into many languages, both ancient and modern, and has inspired admiration and hate around the globe. When reading *The Histories*, it's essential to understand who Herodotus was, his reasons for writing, and why his account of the Greco-Persian wars earned him the title of father of history.³

There is an extreme lack of certainty⁴ surrounding the information historians have collected on Herodotus' life, but they have pieced together that he was born in Halicarnassus

¹ Catherine Connors, "Eratosthenes, Strabo, and the Geographer's Gaze." *Pacific Coast Philology* 46, no. 2 (2011): 139–140, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41851022>. The term *geographia* ("writing the world") was coined by Eratosthenes of Cyrene (275-194 BCE). Although none of his works have survived in good condition, what we do have includes a variety of geographical, mathematical, literary, musical, and chronological observations that Eratosthenes used to explain the world around him. Because of the work of Strabo (64/63 BCE - 24 CE), a geographer who lived while Rome was teetering between being the Roman Republic and the Roman Empire, we do know that, despite Eratosthenes' work being the oldest example of geography available, he was not the first to use geography to study the world around him.

² Before Herodotus, accounts of the past were usually written in lists or in the form of poetry.

³ Cicero, Marcus Tullius, *The Political Works of Marcus Tullius Cicero*, trans. by Francis Barham (London: Veritatis Splendor Publications, 2014), 26. The term "father of history" was first used by Marcus Tullius Cicero to describe Herodotus in his book *Treatise on the Laws*.

⁴ Herodotus, *The Histories: Introduction and Notes by Paul Cartledge*, trans. Tom Holland (New York: Penguin Classics, 2013), xv-xvi.

sometime in the 480s BCE. During this time, the Greek city-state of Halicarnassus was a tributary to the great Achaemenid Empire, the first Persian Empire. Unfortunately, because the biographical literary genre did not yet exist during Herodotus' lifetime, there is not much information available on his upbringing. Instead, we must rely on unverified work to understand the writer's life. Much of the information historians have on Herodotus comes from a small section of the tenth century CE Byzantine lexicon, the *Souda*. This dictionary, which is attributed to a man named Soudidas, tells us that Herodotus was born to a father named Lyxes. The *Souda* also references an uncle named Payanassis. Both Lyxes and Panayssis are Greek variants of Carian names. If the dictionary is correct, Herodotus may have been of Carian-Greek origin or, at the very least, his family was close enough to a group of Carians that they chose to use non-Greek names. His potential Carian ancestry, or childhood under the influence of the "barbarian" Persians, could explain why Herodotus was so willing to learn from what he calls "barbarian" peoples. Interestingly, Herodotus seems to have used the word barbarian not as an insult but simply to refer to anybody who did not speak Greek, a change from many of his contemporaries.

When Herodotus was young, he was exiled from Halicarnassus. According to historian Paul Cartledge, this experience "may have been conducive to the making of the future historian. At any rate, other famous Greek historians, Thucydides and Polybius most notably, found exile a formative experience."⁵ It is assumed that Herodotus went to Samos directly after his exile, as his descriptions of the island's engineering perfectly match archeological records of a sixth-century water tunnel that went through a mountain and a rather impressive temple of Hera. According to the *Souda*, Herodotus only returned to Halicarnassus to overthrow Lygradmis, a local tyrant.⁶ At some point in his life, Herodotus was most likely drawn to Athens, where many of the intellectuals of the time inevitably ended up. In Athens, he may have — as was the custom — read sections of *The Histories* aloud to large, Panhellenic crowds. He seems to have liked the Athenians, for his portrayal of their role in winning the Greco-Persian Wars was so positive that the city-state awarded him a large sum of money (although, once again, the source that tells us this is uncertifiable).⁷ Finally, we know for sure that Herodotus finished his life in southern Italy, where he became a citizen of the Athenian-led settlement of Thouria. Later manuscripts of *The*

⁵ Herodotus, *The Histories*, xvi.

⁶ Martin Ostwald, "Herodotus and Athenas, *Illinois Classical Studies* 16, no 1 (1991): 138.

⁷ Herodotus, *The Histories*, xvii.

Histories reflect this change, as the writer began to introduce himself as Herodotus of Thouria instead of Herodotus of Halicarnassus.

If Herodotus indeed visited as many places as he claims, he must have been a wealthy man. According to historian James Redfield, “To travel and observe is a thing characteristically Greek; the prototype is Odysseus... For a Greek there are three great reasons for travel: commerce, war, and seeing the sights.”⁸ Driven by an interest in all three and funded by an enormous travel budget, Herodotus chose to chronicle his journeys and the tales told to him by those he met in what eventually became *The Histories*.

Herodotus chronologically begins his history of the Greco-Persian Wars in roughly 550 BCE, one hundred years (or, as he puts it, three generations)⁹ before he began writing. According to Cartledge, “he starts there because 75 to 100 years constitute the rough upper limit of reliably transmitted human memory.”¹⁰ Thus, Herodotus begins his inquiry with the tale of Croesus of Lydia, who was told by Pythia, the Oracle of Delphi, two things. First, Pythia tells Croesus that he will destroy an immense power. Second, she states that “Only when a mule has become the ruler of the Medes” will Croesus lose his control over Lydia.¹¹ Deeming himself invincible, as it would be impossible for a mule to take the throne, Croesus sets off to take down Cyrus, the king of Medes. After a series of battles, the Lythians lose the fight, and Croesus is taken prisoner. “After all,” Herodotus says, “what else but a mule would you term Cyrus, a man who has both the blue blood of his mother flowing through his veins, and the blood of his father, who came from a quite different country, and was of a much lower social class?”¹² Thus, the Oracle of Delphi’s second warning came true. But what of the first? Croesus had misinterpreted the prophecy, for in fighting Cyrus, Herodotus points out that Croesus did indeed take down a powerful empire: his own.

The Histories continues for eight more books, although it was not Herodotus who split them up this way. For clarity’s sake, scholars at the Library of Alexandria added the divisions in the third century.¹³ The fall of Croesus and the rise of Cyrus take up the majority of Book 1. In the second book, Herodotus goes into great detail about Egyptian customs, history, and

⁸ James Redfield, “Herodotus the Tourist,” *Classical Philology* 80, no. 2 (1985): 98, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/270156>.

⁹ Herodotus, *The Histories*, 2.142.

¹⁰ Herodotus, *The Histories*, xxiii-xxiv.

¹¹ Herodotus, *The Histories*, 1.55.

¹² Herodotus, *The Histories*, 1.91.

¹³ Herodotus, *The Histories*, xxxv

geography, a topic that fascinated him. The story of Cyrus's son, the Persian King Cambyses, his rise to madness, and eventual death is extensively detailed in Book 3. Next, in Book 4, Herodotus writes about the Persian King Darius I's failed crusade against the Scythians as well as the Persian's successful expedition into Libyan territory. In Books 4 through 8, Herodotus continues to follow the Persians' journey as they expand their territory into Greek and non-Greek lands. Finally, in Book 9, Herodotus concludes his study of Greco-Persian affairs with the battles of Platea and Mycale and the Siege of Sestus.

Father of Lies

At first glance, the attribution of the title “father of history” to Herodotus seems perplexing. Here is this book, filled with legends and myths, being heralded as the first example of historiography by none other than Cicero himself. The main criticism of his work has been his use of fables, with historians just one generation below him — including, indirectly, Thucydides — arguing that his work was tainted by drama and magic; therefore, it could not be accurate history.¹⁴ Even though Cartledge claims that “Cicero’s ascription of paternity to Herodotus was a massive compliment,”¹⁵ further analysis of Cicero’s *Treatise on The Laws* illuminates another story. “History has its laws, and poetry its privileges,” Cicero says, “The main object of the former is truth in all its relation: the main object of the latter is delight and pleasure of every description. Yet even in Herodotus, the father of Greek history... we find fables scarcely less numerous than those which appear in the works of the poets.”¹⁶ Essentially, Cicero’s criticism of Herodotus lies in his work being influenced too heavily by poetry, the most popular literary and entertainment genre during Herodotus’ lifetime. As a result, Herodotus loses an element of credibility.

Indeed, Herodotus’ work does reflect Greek drama. One story in particular highlights this inspiration. In Book 7 of *The Histories*, the Persian man Artabanus, uncle to Xerxes, stumbles upon his crying nephew. When Artabanus inquires as to why Xerxes is weeping, Xerxes admits that he has realized that all of their men will be dead in one hundred years’ time. To this, Artabanus says, “Death, to a man whose existence is a burden, provides an escape very much worth choosing. That God should grant us merely the briefest taste of how sweet life can be

¹⁴ Thucydides was a historian born just one generation after Herodotus known for writing *The History of the Peloponnesian War*.

¹⁵ Herodotus, *The Histories*, xix.

¹⁶ Marcus Tullius Cicero, *The Political Works of Marcus Tullius Cicero*, 26.

served to demonstrate just how much he begrudges us.”¹⁷ Such views on life are not Persian; instead, they reflect the plots of Greek tragedies and the wisdom of Greek philosophers. This story would have delighted Herodotus’ Greek audiences in Athens and Thouria. This passage is just one of many instances where Herodotus’ imagined conversations indirectly present his Greek ways of thinking, as if he can’t quite understand a non-Greek’s worldview.

From a modern perspective, Herodotus’ work is common at best and riddled with lies at worst. From a historical perspective, however, Herodotus’ work is simply an early attempt at writing history that is unfairly judged by the standards of modern historical study. In fact, Herodotus is the earliest known example of somebody studying past events with a specific emphasis on individuals, societies, and general human affairs. Before Herodotus, most works that documented the past — such as Homer’s *Odyssey* — were free to describe events that never occurred. In contrast, history aims to write truthful descriptions of the past in order to preserve it for future generations to study. According to Emanuel Mickel, “In Herodotus one can see the inevitable confrontation between what one knows through one’s own experience, what one can learn secondarily from others, and what one can glean from the stories one hears concerning the origins of the civilization or country and its philosophical context.”¹⁸

Father of Ethnography

Interestingly enough, most of Herodotus’ opinions on Greek culture and customs are implied or put into the mouths of characters in his book, not stated aloud. One example of this trend shows up in Book 8 when Herodotus says that “civil strife among people of the same heritage and race compares as disastrously to a united war effort as does war itself to peace.”¹⁹ Here, he displays his irritation that Greek city-states continue to fight amongst one another when, united, they could destroy their common enemies. Similarly, most of Herodotus’ writings on the Greeks center around their knack for war. In contrast, Herodotus goes to great lengths to educate his mostly Greek audience on non-Greek cultures,²⁰ using ethnographic research to explain how these “barbarian” groups fit into the Greco-Persian Wars. Even when speaking about practices

¹⁷ Herodotus, *The Histories*, 7.46.

¹⁸ Emanuel J. Mickel, “Fictional History and Historical Fiction,” *Romance Philology* 66, no. 1 (2012): 58, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44741973>.

¹⁹ Herodotus, *The Histories*, 8.3.

²⁰ In Book 1 alone, Herodotus describes cultural practices and beliefs belonging to the Aeolians, Ionians, Lydians, Persians, Babylonians, Massagetans, and Sythians, and Book 2 is, essentially, a large tangent based on Egyptian culture. Although Herodotus was a well traveled man, he was not able to visit much of Egypt. As a result, he was forced to rely on testimony from Egyptian priests that was not very accurate.

that are counterintuitive to typical Greek ways of life, such as cannibalizing the dead (a practice that he attributes to the Callatians), Herodotus seldom judges another group's customs.²¹

In Book 3 of *The Histories*, Herodotus explains why he refrains from judging other cultures, asking his audience to think over a hypothetical situation: “Just suppose that someone proposed to the entirety of mankind that a selection of the very best practices be made from the sum of human custom.” Herodotus claims that nearly every person would pick the customs belonging to their own culture, but only a madman would jeer at the preferred practices of another. He calls out Cambyses, a Persian king, as being “utterly deranged, for why otherwise would he have mocked what to others were hallowed customs?”²² In labeling those who look down upon other cultures as mad, Herodotus pushes his readers to open their minds to different cultural groups. As a result, biased readers can better understand his ethnological studies of non-Greek societies.

Herodotus' dedication to studying and intricately describing peoples and cultures, which seems to have been influenced by a pluralist world-view, has earned him the title “father of comparative ethnography.”²³ Of course, Herodotus' descriptions were not always accurate. Still, they allow his readers, from the time that *The Histories* was published through the modern-day, to have an advanced understanding of the groups participating in the Greco-Persian Wars. As a result, the audience can better understand the motivations that drove the ancient Mediterranean world.²⁴

Herodotus' Reputation

Perhaps the most prevalent criticism of Herodotus' *Histories* is his tendency to veer away from the main subject of the Greco-Persian Wars, choosing instead to fall down rabbit holes about some culture or another. Although Herodotus' contemporaries may not have understood why he included so many seemingly unrelated pieces of information, Tom Holland argues that Herodotus, as understood from a modern standpoint, was just ahead of his time. Holland states

²¹ Herodotus, *The Histories*, 1.199. There are a few exceptions to this rule, including his proclamation that the Babylonian tradition that requires every woman to sleep with a stranger at least once in her life is “the most outrageous” of all the Babylonian customs.

²² Herodotus, *The Histories*, 3.38.

²³ Herodotus, *The Histories*, xxi.

²⁴ Herodotus, *The Histories*, vii. According to Holland, “Herodotus was writing within living memory of events so epic that they continue to thrill and astonish to this day.” His systematic investigation into the Greco-Persian wars allows his readers to better understand why different choices were made. For example, why would Harpagus help Cyrus rise to power if not to punish Astyages, the Median king and Cyrus' grandfather, for feeding Harpagus the flesh of his own son.

that Herodotus followed sources the same way that modern people scour the internet for anything that entertains them, “The internet, with its seemingly infinite web of hyperlinks, has provided a whole new metaphor for Herodotus’ discursive style of relaying information. When he refers to the capture of Nineveh by Medes as ‘an episode I will recount in a later chapter’ (1.106) and then never does so, the frustration for the reader is akin to that of clicking on broken links.”²⁵ In all fairness, not many people had tried to write a history in a manner that was both entertaining and accurate, so there was no rulebook for Herodotus to follow. Instead, he was writing the information that he thought was worth preserving.

Earlier, I mentioned that Cicero criticized the numerous fables that found their way into Herodotus’ book. Nevertheless, it’s also important to note that all historians — even Thucydides, who prided himself on being a more scientific writer than Herodotus — are biased. As a result, no history can be completely truthful. Additionally, even if historians could write an accurate account of the world’s past, with every viewpoint represented, they would need an infinite number of pages and sources to do so. As a result, historians are forced to choose what they can realistically include in their narrative so that they might achieve their goals. Herodotus set out to preserve the past so that “human achievement may be spared the ravages to time, and that everything great and astounding, and all the glory of the exploits which served to display Greeks and barbarians²⁶ alike in such effect, be kept alive, – and additionally, and most importantly, to give the reasons that they went to war.”²⁷ On the first page of his book, Herodotus narrows his parameters to focus on the Greco-Persian Wars and why they happened. This *why* was what made him stand out from his contemporaries, and, in an effort to explain why these wars took place, it was necessary for Herodotus to make connections across time and space, explaining and analyzing both folklore and historical accounts surrounding the Greeks, Persians, and other groups that aided or opposed the two empires. Altogether, this resulted in the many tangents found through *The Histories*.

As a well-traveled man, Herodotus was able to satisfy his inquiries (*historia*) with his own eyewitness accounts or autopsy (*opsis*), tradition (*legin ta legomena*), and hearsay evidence

²⁵ Herodotus, *The Histories*, xiii.

²⁶ Barbarians: Any person who was not of Greek origin; used by Herodotus in relation to people who spoke incomprehensible languages (anything besides Greek)

²⁷ Herodotus, *The Histories*, 1.0. Herodotus famously introduced his *Histories* with the following quote: “Herodotus, of Halicarnassus, here displays his enquiries, that human achievement may be spared the ravages of time, and that everything great and astounding, and all the glory of those exploits which served to display Greeks and barbarians alike to such effect, be kept alive - additionally, and most importantly, to give the reason they went to war.”

(*akoê*). Herodotus values his own eyewitness accounts over any other source. He often clarifies when he is unsure whether or not an event occurred, repeatedly letting the reader know that there are multiple versions of a story or that he cannot verify the information himself. For example, after claiming that the Massagetan Queen Tomyris had poured blood into Emperor Cyrus' mouth after Cyrus died on the battlefield, Herodotus claimed that Tomyris said, "I threatened then that I would glut your thirst for blood. Now - you have had your fill." Herodotus then added, "Granted, there are many different stories of how Cyrus met his end - but the one I have related here appears to me the most plausible."²⁸ He does this once again after explaining that Arion of Methymna was saved from drowning by a dolphin who brought him back to land, finishing up the tale with, "This, at any rate, is the story as told by the Corinthians and the Lesbians,"²⁹ implying that he himself found the story to be unlikely. And yet, Herodotus includes the information. Why? In Book 2, he states, "My own responsibility... is simply to record whatever I may be told by my sources."³⁰ Essentially, the point of *The Histories* is to preserve the past to the best of Herodotus' ability, and, even though Herodotus himself acknowledges that he and his sources might not always be completely accurate, his ability to track down and catalog sources before they were lost to time is truly the mark of a great historian. Therefore, despite the many criticisms that he faced, Herodotus pioneered a method of historical research that still stands to this day.

An Inspiration to Man

Arnaldo Momigliano states that Herodotus is as much "the father of history" to the modern historian as he was to Cicero, the man who gave him the name.³¹ According to Momigliano, the sole person that Herodotus treated as an authoritative predecessor was Hecataeus of Miletus, who had attempted to apply rationality to mythical Greek tales and genealogies. Of course, one could also say that Homer (whom Herodotus makes fun of on at

²⁸ Herodotus, *The Histories*, 1.214

²⁹ Herodotus, *The Histories*, 1.23. Arion of Methymna was a famous Greek musician who had been touring the Mediterranean in a boat manned by Corinthians. Once the boat was out at sea, the Corinthians decided to throw Arion overboard and take his money. Arion walked the plank, but was rescued by a dolphin and taken back to Taenarum. Arion then went to Periander, the tyrant of Corinth at the time, for refuge. Periander, shocked by his friend's story, summoned the sailors who had robbed and attempted to murder Arion. When Periander met with them, the men, still believing Arion to be dead, told the tyrant that they had simply dropped Arion off in Italy. It was at that moment that, supposedly, Arion jumped out from behind his hiding spot, catching them in their lie.

³⁰ Herodotus, *The Histories*, 2.123

³¹ Arnaldo Momigliano, "Greek Historiography," *History and Theory* 17, no. 1 (1978): 3.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/2504899>.

least one occasion)³² also influenced Herodotus' use of glory as a defining characteristic of his book. Still, besides Hecataeus and Homer, most of Herodotus' inspiration derives from his thirst for knowledge and the people he met while on his travels.

Herodotus, Momigliano claims, stands out to modern scholars as having a profound influence on the study of history for two main reasons. Firstly, the word *historia* took on a new meaning after Herodotus released *The Histories*. What was initially used throughout the book to mean "inquiry" suddenly became a term used to describe Herodotus' work: the compilation, research, and study of past events. Secondly, Herodotus significantly contributed to Greek historiography by introducing his components of Herodotean inquiry, namely ethnography, war history, and constitutional research.³³

Perhaps the most prevalent comparison of Herodotus to any other historian would be to his near-contemporary, Thucydides. If Herodotus was the father of history, Thucydides was the father of scientific history. The two men, whose lives did overlap some time in the fifth century BCE, are hard not to compare. Famously, there is a herm topped with the stone heads of Herodotus and Thucydides.³⁴ They are placed together but are forever looking in opposite directions, a perfect metaphor for their real-life relationship. As previously mentioned, Herodotus has often been criticized for his inclusion of fables and long-winded tangents. Meanwhile, Thucydides — who wrote *The History of the Peloponnesian War* and is credited with creating political realism — seems to have fixed Herodotus' mistakes. His decision to narrow the discipline of history to focus primarily on politics and war without the inclusion of fables and drama influenced how his successors wrote history for another thousand years after his death. This achievement has led some to conclude that the two men should be awarded co-parentage. Another striking contrast between the two historians is that Thucydides wrote about events within his lifetime, whereas Herodotus wrote about events from the near past. As a

³² Herodotus, *The Histories*, xxi. Who did Herodotus believe started the Greco-Persian Wars, Paul Cartledge asks. "Was it the barbarian Easterners, or was it the Greeks? 'Learned' Persian and Phoenician 'authorities' are cited, inconclusively, but Herodotus' tongue, it would appear, is pretty firmly lodged in his cheek. For in his view, women don't just get abducted willy-nilly, so Spartan queen Helen must bear some considerable share of the blame or responsibility for being carried off by the Trojan prince Paris. In any case, if his audience thought Helen was abducted by Paris from Sparta to Troy, as Homer had quite blatantly, unashamedly and unambiguously recounted, well, Herodotus the critical historian is going to make them think again."

³³ Momigliano, "Greek Historiography," 3. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2504899>.

³⁴ Herms are sculptures that depict the head, and sometimes torso, of their subject. Originally, herms were decorated with the head of the Greek god Hermes and placed at physical barriers, like doors. Eventually, they began to depict historical figures as well. The double herm of Herodotus and Thucydides is located at the National Archaeological Museum of Naples.

result, Thucydides could use personal observation (*opsis*) to satisfy his inquiries. On the other hand, Herodotus, who favored personal observation over all other sources, was forced to write what others had told him.³⁵ These distinctions helped paint the picture that Thucydides was the true father of history; meanwhile, Herodotus was the father of lies.

This takes us to the great historical debate: Which historian left behind a more significant legacy, Herodotus or Thucydides? Momigliano offers his own opinion that I am content to agree with, stating that Thucydides did nothing more than restate Herodotus' criteria for historical study.³⁶ The main difference is that he was able to improve upon Herodotus' weak spots. And Thucydides is not the only one. When looking at most modern historiographers — including scientific historians such as Yuval Noah Harari and cultural historians like Mark Kurlansky — there is almost always an echo of Herodotus in their work, despite how little they talk of fables.³⁷ This echo can be seen in their use of prose, their analysis of cultural differences and similarities, their decisions to write down events that happened before they were alive, their research methods, and the fluidity that connects their histories together. As a result, Herodotus has found his way into every historical narrative, carving out his own place in human history. And no, Herodotus was not always correct, but that fact does not diminish his impact, as some may have you believe.³⁸ Besides, as Herodotus is reminded by Thersander of Orchomenus, “Even if you speak entirely reliably, no one ever wants to believe you... Of all the miseries to which men are prey, this is the most hateful.”³⁹ Even before Herodotus wrote *The Histories*, he was well aware that some might label him a liar. And yet he wrote the book anyway, ultimately preserving human achievement over his good reputation.

Even today, Herodotus' work is still a major source of information for Greco-Persian historians and aficionados. A quick search on JSTOR yields nearly 40,000 results, and typing “Herodotus” into the Google search engine will reveal over 13 million hits dedicated to or mentioning Herodotus, highlighting his long-lasting impact. And yet, despite the numerous works that he has inspired, until the 1980s, most academic articles labeled Herodotus a liar,

³⁵ Herodotus, *The Histories*, 2.29

³⁶ Momigliano, “Greek Historiography,” 3. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2504899>.

³⁷ Like Herodotus' *Histories*, Yuval Noah Harari's book, *Sapiens*, examines both the human and scientific aspects of history. Meanwhile, Mark Kurlansky's book, *Cod*, follows the relationship between cod and humans through time, emphasizing how cod has impacted multiple cultures. Kurlansky's examination of different cultures is reminiscent of Herodotus' intricate depictions of Greek and non-Greek peoples. It is also worth noting that both men took thematic approaches to their individual histories, with emphasis on fish and conflict.

³⁸ Herodotus, *The Histories*, xii.

³⁹ Herodotus, *The Histories*, 9.16.

preferring to paint Thucydides as the true father of history.⁴⁰ Eventually, the publication of François Hartog's *The Mirror of Herodotus* — which Cartledge calls “a deadly penetrating combination of French post-Saussurean structuralism and equally French (in origin) narratology” — essentially destroyed the earlier narrative that Herodotus was a common man and a liar. In his essay, Hartog explains that all of Herodotus' work, even his fables, had to have been based in some truth due to *The Histories'* extreme (and consistent) cultural relevance.

Hartog was just one of many historians who changed the narrative to favor Herodotus during the rise of New Historicism in the late twentieth century. In 1987, an academic journal titled *Arethusa* centered an entire volume around the Greek historian. Throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s, further discourse on the importance and validity of Herodotus' work was published. Many agreed with Hartog, stating that many of the “myths” found throughout Herodotus' *Histories* were rooted in truth.

Cartledge asks, “What are we to make, for instance of his report of giant Indian ants, ‘midway between dogs and foxes in size’ (3.102), who dig up gold, or the griffins ‘who stand guard over gold’ (4.13) in the mountains beyond Scythia? These are the kind of stories that... have resulted in a long tradition of dismissing Herodotus as gullible at best.”⁴¹ And yet, despite the absurdness of these stories, historians and scientists have found explanations for them. “The giant ants, it has been argued, were in fact a breed of Himalayan marmots, which have been known to expose gold bearing soil when they dig their holes; the griffins, perhaps, were the weathered skeletons of Protoceratops, a dinosaur whose fossils are to be found scattered everywhere in the Gobi Desert.”⁴² Moreover, archaeological evidence has proven many of Herodotus' descriptions to be accurate. These discoveries, which inspired numerous academic articles, have further pushed Herodotus away from being the father of lies and closer to being the father of history in the eyes of the academic community.

⁴⁰ Paul Cartledge, “Taking Herodotus Personally,” *The Classical World* 102, no. 4 (2009): 374. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40599873>. Geoffrey Enerts Maurice de Ste. Croix, a British historian who specialized in the classics, believed that Herodotus' story “was just a miserable attempt to fabricate pseudo-history out of a widespread folkloric tale... just the sort of thing that Ste. Croix's hero Thucydides had castigated as “the mythic,” and had deliberately sought rigorously to exclude from his own work.”

⁴¹ Herodotus, *The Histories*, xii.

⁴² Herodotus, *The Histories*, xii.

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