

## Oracular History and Athenian Empire

Margot Minardi, Humanities 110, 9/28/2009

*To see others as sharing a nature with ourselves is the merest decency. But it is from the far more difficult achievement of seeing ourselves among others, as a local example of the forms of human life locally taken, a case among cases, a world among worlds, that the largeness of mind, without which objectivity is self-congratulation and tolerance a sham, comes.*  
- Clifford Geertz

All passages from Herodotus, *Histories*, Penguin ed., unless otherwise noted.

1. The historian starts with a provisional selection of facts and a provisional interpretation in the light of which that selection has been made.... As he works, both the interpretation and the selection and ordering of facts undergo subtle and perhaps partly unconscious changes through the reciprocal action of one or the other. And this reciprocal action also involves reciprocity between present and past, since the historian is part of the present and the facts belong to the past.... My first answer therefore to the question, What is history?, is that it is a continuous process of interaction between the historian and his facts, an unending dialogue between the present and the past. (E. H. Carr, *What Is History?* [New York: Vintage, 1991], 35)
2. This is the *apodexis* of the *historiē* of Herodotus of Halicarnassus, put forth to prevent what has been made to happen by men from fading with time, and to prevent great and marvelous deeds, some accomplished by Greeks, others by barbarians, from losing fame, and in particular through what *aitiē* they came to war with each other. (1.0, translated by Egbert J. Bakker in “The Making of History: Herodotus’ *Historiēs Apodexis*,” in *Brill’s Companion to Herodotus*, ed. Bakker et al. [Boston: Brill, 2002], 3-4; punctuation altered for clarity)
3. [Croesus] was the first foreigner so far as we know to come into direct contact with the Greeks, both in the way of conquest and alliance, forcing tribute from Ionians, Aeolians, and Asiatic Dorians. (1.6)
4. When all these nations had been added to the Lydian empire, and Sardis was at the height of her wealth and prosperity, all the great Greek teachers [*sophistai*] of that epoch, one after another, paid visits to the capital. Much the most distinguished of them was Solon the Athenian, the man who at the request of his countrymen had made a code of laws for Athens. (1.29)
5. [Solon to Croesus:] Nobody of course can have all these advantages, any more than a country can produce everything it needs: whatever it has, it is bound to lack something. The best country is the one which has most. It is the same with people: no man is ever self-sufficient—there is sure to be something missing. But whoever has the greatest number of the good things I have mentioned, and keeps them to the end, and dies a peaceful death, that man, Croesus, deserves in my opinion to be called happy. Look to the end, no matter what it is you are considering. Often enough God gives a man a glimpse of happiness, and then utterly ruins him. (1.32)
6. As to the oracle, Croesus had no right to find fault with it: the god had declared that if he attacked the Persians he would bring down a mighty empire. After an answer like that, the wise thing would have been to send again to enquire which empire was meant, Cyrus’ or his own. But as he misinterpreted what was said and made no second inquiry, he must admit the fault to have been his own.... When the Lydians returned to Sardis with the Priestess’ answer and reported it to Croesus, he admitted that the god was innocent and he had only himself to blame. (1.91)

7. “My lord,” said [Sandanis to Croesus], “you are preparing to fight against men who dress in leather—both breeches and everything else. So rough is their country that they eat as much as they have, never as much as they want. They drink no wine but only water. They have no good things at all, not even figs for dessert. Now if you conquer this people, what will you get from them, seeing they have nothing for you to take? And if they conquer you, think how many good things you will lose; for once they taste the luxuries of Lydia they will hold on to them so tightly that nothing will make them let go....” Croesus did not take this advice—though Sandanis was right: the Persians before their conquest of Lydia had no luxuries of any kind. (1.71)
  
8. Behind Xerxes marched a thousand spearmen, their weapons pointing upwards...all men of the best and noblest Persian blood; then a thousand picked Persian cavalry, then—again chosen for quality...—a body of Persian infantry ten thousand strong. Of these a thousand had golden pomegranates instead of spikes on the butt-end of their spears, and were arrayed surrounding the other nine thousand, whose spears had silver pomegranates. The troops...immediately behind Xerxes had golden apples. (7.41)
  
9. This Artayctes who suffered death by crucifixion had an ancestor named Artembares; and he it was who made the Persians a proposal, which they readily accepted and passed on to Cyrus. “Since,” they said, “Zeus has given empire to the Persians, and among individuals to you, Cyrus, by your conquest of Astyages, let us leave this small and barren country of ours and take possession of a better. There are plenty to choose from—some near, some further off; if we take one of them, we shall be admired more than ever. It is the natural thing for a sovereign people to do; and when will there be a better opportunity than now, when we are masters of many nations and all Asia?”  
Cyrus did not think much of this suggestion; he replied that they might act upon it if they pleased, but added the warning that, if they did so, they must prepare themselves to rule no longer, but to be ruled by others. “Soft countries,” he said, “breed soft men. It is not the property of any one soil to produce fine fruits and good soldiers too.” The Persians had to admit that this was true and that Cyrus was wiser than they; so they left him, and chose rather to live in a rugged land and rule than to cultivate rich plains and be slaves to others. (9.122)
  
10. [Croesus to Cyrus:] If you recognize the fact that both you and the troops under your command are merely human, then the first thing I would tell you is that human life is like a revolving wheel and never allows the same people to continue long in prosperity. (1.207)

### Timeline

c.	560	Croesus becomes king of Lydia; builds Lydian empire
	559	Cyrus becomes king of Persia
c.	547	Lydia (under Croesus) falls to Persia (under Cyrus)
	530	Cyrus dies in the Battle of the Massagetae
c.	490	Herodotus born
	480	Xerxes of Persia invades Greece
	479	Greek victory over the Persians (Second Persian War)
	454	Treasury of the Delian League moved from Delos to Athens
	450s-440s	Herodotus composes much of the <i>Histories</i>
	431	Peloponnesian War begins (Athens and allies against Sparta and allies)
	420s	Herodotus continues to write and revise the <i>Histories</i>

*The bibliography for this lecture is accessible via the syllabus on the Hum 110 webpage.*