

Humanities 110: Herodotus and/or the Rest of Us
Robert Knapp (10/2/2009)

I. Introduction

A. Fiction vs. History/Herodotus and the “Other”

1. Ryszard Kapuściński, *The Other*
2. History and our encounter with the other (including the other in ourselves)

B. Topics of this lecture

1. Herodotus as inquirer and rhetor
2. Herodotus’s views of non-Greek peoples
3. Cultural relativism (or multiculturalism[?])
 - a. The view that in human affairs there are no truths, just views

II. Herodotus’s Purposes as Inquirer and Rhetor

A. Structural differentiation (S. Humphreys)

1. Herodotus (425 B.C.E.) vs. Homer (~700 B.C.E.)
2. *sophistai*
 - a. “discipline” vs. “culture” (Kant)

“the compulsion, by which the constant tendency to disobey certain rules is restrained and finally extirpated” vs. that “which is intended to give a certain kind of skill, and not to cancel any habitual mode of action already present.”

B. Herodotus and “discipline”

1. His critique of Homer’s story about Helen
 - a. Criteria for evaluating evidence
 - aa. **Reliable chain of transmission**
 - bb. **Generic difference between history and poetry**
 - cc. **Theory of rational action**

C. Herodotus as appropriating Solon’s role

1. The traveler with advice for the Greeks about empire and custom

D. Egyptians as guardians of *nomos*

III. Herodotus’s Views of Non-Greek Peoples

- A. Greek debt to Egypt in history and religion
- B. Non-Greek peoples and *nomos*
 1. *Nomoi* and *schemata*
 - a. Inversion (cf. James Redfield)
 - b. System of differences and contrasts (François Hartog)
 2. **Egyptians vs. nomads (Scythians and Massagetae)**

IV. Herodotus and Cultural Relativism

A. Herodotus’s argument carried “emblematically” by legendary episodes and “structurally” by large contrastive patterns

1. Gyges episode
2. Kleisthenes’s reforms
 - B. Herodotus’s argument (put abstractly): that Athens wins the war because the Athenians both respect *nomos* and have put *nomos* under some degree of rational control
1. How to test that argument
 - a. Show that Athens’ political arrangements confer strategic advantage
1. **Xerxes v. Themistocles**
2. **Land-based v. sea-based empires**
 - aa. Correct for Herodotus’s bias against the Persians (A. Momigliano)
3. **Place of slavery in Greek economy and political ideology**
4. **Place of women in Athenian culture**

aa. Brotherhood of warriors

bb. Polis as “family”

C. Greek “rationality” as paradigm for “universal” modern culture, including
its challenge to “mere” tradition and custom

Names and Terms

barbaroi

Colchia

Demaratus

despotes

Kleisthenes

nomos

rhetor

sophistai

Tilapia nilotica (bream)

Quotations

“Each of these people, whom we meet along the road and across the world, is in a way twofold; each one consists of two beings whom it is often difficult to separate, a fact that we do not always realise. One of these beings is a person like the rest of us: he has his joys and sorrows, his good and bad days; he is glad of his successes, does not like to be hungry and does not like it when he is cold; he feels pain as suffering and misery, and good fortune as satisfying and fulfilling. The other being, who overlaps and is interwoven with the first, is a person as bearer of racial features, and as bearer of culture, beliefs and convictions. Neither of these beings appears in a pure, isolated state - they coexist, having a reciprocal effect on each other.”—Kapuściński

“Herodotus was aware of man’s sedentary nature and realised that to get to know Others you must set off on a journey, go to them, and show a desire to meet them; so he kept travelling, visiting the Egyptians and the Scythians, the Persians and the Lydians, remembering everything he heard from them, as well as what he saw for himself. In short, he wanted to know them because he understood that to know ourselves we have to know Others, who act as the mirror in which we see ourselves reflected; he knew that to understand ourselves better we have to understand Others, to compare ourselves with them, to measure ourselves against them. As a citizen of the world, he did not believe that we should isolate ourselves from Others, or slam the gates in their faces. Xenophobia, Herodotus implied, is a sickness of people who are scared, suffering an inferiority complex, terrified by the prospect of seeing themselves in the mirror of the culture of Others. And his entire book is a solid construction of mirrors in which we keep getting a better and clearer view of, above all, Greece and the Greeks.”—Kapuściński

Further Reading

Hartog, François, *The Mirror of Herodotus: The Representation of the Other in the Writing of History* (1988)

Humphreys, Sarah, *Anthropology and the Greeks* (1978)

Kapuściński, Ryszard, *Travels with Herodotus* (2007)

_____, *The Other* (2008)

Mendelsohn, Daniel. “What Was Herodotus Trying to Tell Us?” *The New Yorker* (April 28, 2008)

Momigliano, Arnaldo, *The Classical Foundations of Modern Historiography* (1990)

Patterson, Orlando. *Slavery and Social Death* (1982)

Redfield, James, “Herodotus the Tourist,,” *Classical Philology* (1985) 80.2: 97-118.

Romm, James. *Herodotus* (1998)

Strassler, Robert B. (ed.) *The Landmark Herodotus: The Histories* (2007)