Classical Civilisation 1A Herodotus III: the *Histories* as history

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Overview of lecture

- Unbelievable stories
- Divine causation
- Military history
- History of Persia



UNBELIEVABLE STORIES



Unbelievable for a variety of reasons:

- Too much like folktales (Cyrus, Pheretime)
- Anachronistic (Croesus & Solon, constitutional debate 3.82)
- Unlikely (Arion and the dolphin)
- Divine intervention (Croesus)



Folktales

- Are told by people to explain their own past
- Can tell us a lot about how different Greek poleis construed their own past
- 'Intentional history'
- Not literally true, but historically revealing



Anachronistic stories

- Possibly stories told by Herodotus' sources as 'intentional history'
- Or invented by him to illustrate overarching themes in the *Histories*:
 - □ Solon & Croesus:
 - The powerlessness of human beings
 - The instability of good fortune
 - □ The Constitutional Debate:
 - The superiority of democracy
 - The inability of the Persians to recognise this superiority



Unlikely stories

- Unlikely to a 21st-century reader but not to an ancient audience
 - □ Is it really unlikely, or just unusual in a work of history?
- Herodotus tells them as marvels, thomata
- Like folktales: the kind of stories people tell about their own past, intentional history



Divine internvention

Closely related to divine causation, our next topic.



DIVINE CAUSATION: CROESUS AS CASE STUDY



Anachronistic meeting of Croesus and Solon

Croesus

- King of Lydia
- Richest man in the world
- Believes this makes him the happiest man in the world

Solon

- □one of the seven Sages
- □ Athenian law-giver
- □ Functions as 'wise adviser' in Herodotus



"'Croesus', Solon replied, 'when you asked me about men and their affairs, you were putting your question to someone who is well aware of how utterly jealous the divine is, and how it is likely to confound us. Anyone who lives for a long time is bound to see and endure many things he would rather avoid. (...) It follows, Croesus, that human life is entirely a matter of chance.

Now, I can see that you are extremely rich and that you rule over large numbers of people, but I won't be in a position to say what you're asking me to say about you <u>until I find out that you died well</u>. You see, someone with vast wealth is no better off than someone who lives from day to day, <u>unless good fortune attends him and sees to it that, when he dies, he dies well and with all his advantages intact</u>." (Hdt. 1.32)



- The gods are jealous dangerous to be too successful
- Life is a matter of chance
- The fortunate/god-favoured (eu-tuches) man is better off than the wealthy (olbios) man
- Call no-one happy until he is dead



Little room for free will; human life is ruled by superhuman powers



Solon is proved right about life's uncertainty by:

1. The death of Croesus' son:

'After Solon's departure, the weight of divine anger descended on Croesus, in all likelihood for thinking that he was the happiest man in the world' (Hdt. 1.34.1).

2. Croesus' capture by Cyrus:

'although Croesus' situation up on top of the pyre was desperate, his mind turned to Solon's saying that no one who is still alive is happy, and it occurred to him how divinely inspired Solon had been to say that.' (Hdt. 1.86)



But is he also right about the absence of free will?

- 'After Solon's departure, the weight of <u>divine anger</u> descended on Croesus, <u>in all likelihood for thinking</u> that he was the happiest man in the world' (Hdt. 1.34.1) =
- Hybris nemesis
- Croesus has tested the oracles and 'was the first to commit crimes of aggression against the Greeks'.
- Croesus invades Persia because of
 - Desire to avenge his brother-in-law, Astyages
 - Oracles opaque or deceptive



Generational justice

- Croesus looks for justice in sending to Apollo (Hdt. 1.90)
- Apollo: 'Not even a god can escape his ordained fate. Croesus has paid for the crime of his ancestor four generations ago (...) In fact, Loxias wanted the fall of Sardis to happen in the time of Croesus' sons rather than of Croesus himself, but it was not possible to divert the Fates. However (...), he managed to delay the fall of Sardis for three years.'
 (Hdt. 1.91)
- > Divine justice is generational rather than/as well as individual.
- The gods are ruled by fate
- But Gyges still chose to look at the queen naked



Keeping the balance: Polycrates and the ring

- Polycrates is successful in everything
- Warned by guest-friend
- Throws away ring
- Gets ring back
- Is lured into a trap, murdered, and crucified

But he also killed his own brother and sent another brother into exile...



Causation in the Histories

Divine

- Punishment
 - Individual
 - Generational
- Keeping the balance
- Pushing people towards their fate

Human

- Reciprocity
 - □ Revenge
 - □ Gratitude
- Ambition
- Desire
- Honour

Complex causation



HERODOTUS AS A MILITARY HISTORIAN

The Battle of Marathon as a case study



6.112: The Athenian Charge

When their battle lines were drawn up and the omens from the sacrifices were favourable, the Athenians were released, and they charged the invaders at a run. The distance between the two armies was no less than eight stades. When the Persians saw the Athenians running towards them, they got ready to receive them, but they thought the Athenians must be mad - mad enough to bring about their utter destruction – because they could see how few of them there were, and that their charge was unsupported by either cavalry or archers. That was the invaders' assessment of the situation, but when the Athenians came to grips with them all along the line, they fought remarkably well. They were the first Greeks known to charge enemy forces at a run, and the first to endure the sight of Persian dress and the men wearing it. Up until then, even the word 'Persian' had been a source of fear in Greece.

Favourable omens

The distance run

Persian thoughts

Uniqueness of Athenian experience



6.113: The Battle

The fighting at Marathon was long and drawn out. In the centre, where the Greeks were faced with the Persians themselves, and the Sacae, they were beaten; the invaders got the better of the Greeks at this point, broke through their lines, and pursued them inland. However, the Athenians and the Plataeans on their respective wings were victorious. They left the Persians they had routed to flee from the battlefield and concentrated on those who had broken through the centre. The two wings combined into a single fighting unit – and the Athenians won. They harried the retreating Persians and cut them down, until they reached the coast, where they called up fire and began to take over the ships.

Length of battle

Battle formation and troop movements

The rout



6.114: Noteworthy Casualties

During this mêlée the War Archon was killed, fighting bravely, and one fo the commanders, Stesilaus the son of Thrasylaus, died as well. It was also at this point that while Cynegeirus the son of Euphorion was grabbing hold of the sterin of one of the ships he was fatally wounded when his hand was chopped off by a battleaxe. A number of other famous Athenians fell as well.

Officer casualties

Cynegeirus loses his hand.



6.115: Persian Flight and race for Athens I

The Athenians captured seven of the Persian ships in this way, but the invaders managed to put to sea with the rest of their fleet They picked up the Eretrian prisoners from the island where they had left them and then set out to sail around Cape Sunium, with the intention of reaching the city of Athens before the Athenian forces could get there. In Athens the Alcmaeonidae were blamed for setting this strategy in motion by raising a shield as a prearranged signal to the Persians when they were out at sea.

Ships captured by the Athenians

Persian flight

The race for Athens, from the Persian side

Athenian internal treachery



6.116: Race for Athens II, Persian retreat

While the Persians were sailing around Sunium, the Athenians raced back as quickly as possible to defend the city, which they managed to reach before the Persians got there. On arriving they set up camp at the Heracleum in Cynosarges - thus exchanging one sanctuary of Heracles, the one in Marathon, for another. The invaders hove to off Phalerum, which was Athens' naval harbour in those days, but then after riding at anchor there for a while they sailed back to Asia.

Race for Athens, from the Athenian side

Persian retreat



6.117: General Casualties

The losses on either side at the battle of Marathon were as follows: about 6,400 Persian soldiers fell, while only 192 died on the Athenian side. An extraordinary thing happened there: while fighting bravely in the thick of the action an Athenian called Epizelus the son of Couphagoras lost his sight, even though he had not been wounded or struck by a missile anywhere on his body. And from that moment on, for the rest of his life, he was blind. I have it on hearsay that the story he used to tell about the incident was as follows: it seemed to him that he was confronted by a huge man in heavy armour, whose beard overshadowed his whole shield; but this phantom passed him by and killed the man next to him. That is Epizelus' story, according to my informants.

Numbers

Marvellous event: Epizelus loses his sight



Overview

- 6.112: The Athenian Charge
 - □ Favourable omens
 - □ The distance run
 - □ Persian thoughts
 - Uniqueness of Athenian experience
- 6.113: The Battle
 - □ Length of battle
 - □ Battle formation and troop movements
 - □ The rout
- 6.114: Noteworthy Casualties
 - Officer casualties
 - Cynegeirus loses his hand

- 6.115: Persian Flight
 - Ships captured by the Athenians
 - □ Persian flight
 - Alcmaeonidae blamed for treachery
- 6.116: Race for Athens
- 6.117: General Casualties
 - Numbers
 - Marvellous event: Epizelus loses his sight



Characteristics

- Very short <u>battle</u> narrative: omens, troops, overview of fighting, rout
- Anecdotes of individual experiences
- Emphasis on the uniqueness of the experience(s)
- Emphasis on the Athenian achievement

How historically truthful is such a narrative?



Influenced by sources: memories of footsoldiers



Battles seen from the battlefield rather than from above.

Positive

- Good on individual experiences of war
- The importance of equipment (Plataea)
- Understanding of the mechanics: provisions, logistics

Negative

- Unreliable numbers
- Homeric influences, e.g.
 - □ individual experiences
 - calling for fire by the ships
 - ☐ fight for Leonidas' body
- Problematic on strategy



Herodotus on the causes of Persian defeat

- Equipment (Plataea 9.62-63)
 - □ Lack of body-armour and experience
 - □ Light-armed against hoplites
- Too much confidence in numbers and own superiority (Salamis, Plataea)
- Divine punishment for overconfidence and impiety (Artemisium, Salamis, Plataea)
- Strategic mistake: fighting at Salamis instead of the Peloponnese (ignoring advice of Demaratus and Artemisia)
- Greek cleverness (Themistocles at Salamis)



Modern scholars on the reasons for Persian defeat

- Equipment
- Overconfidence in numbers
- Strategic mistake at Salamis
- (Relied on their fleet for supplies)

Herodotus is largely correct, but can be doubted on the details.



Historicity of Herodotus' Persia



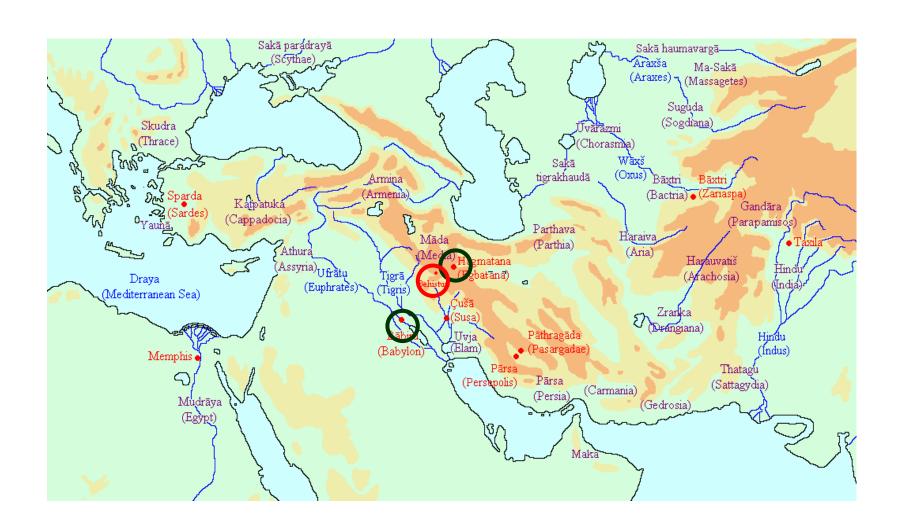
Possible Persian sources – for Herodotus and for us

- No narrative histories
- Royal archives on clay tablets:
 - Administrative records
 - □ Financial records
- Royal inscriptions
 - Most famous = Behistun inscription of Darius' accession
- Eyewitness accounts (e.g. Zopyrus' grandson 3.160)
- But Herodotus apparently did not speak Persian (or Aramaic) [see Hdt. 1.139]...

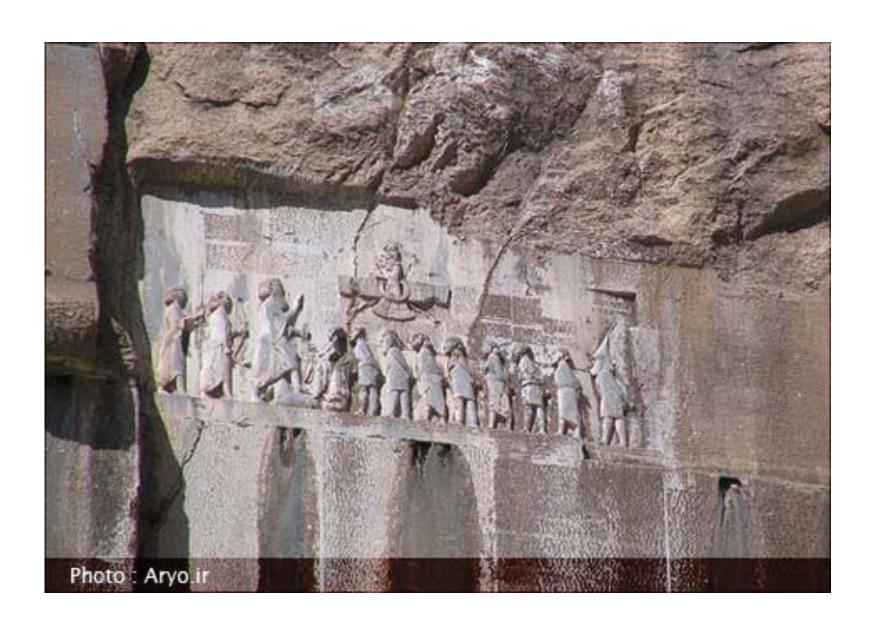


Behistun/Bisitun Inscription

- Behistun = ancient Bagastana
- On the road between Babylon and Ecbatana
- Probable date: 520-519 BC
- Narrates the accesion, rebellion-crushing, and military victories of Darius I
- Records the help of Ahuramazda
- Consists of relief and text in
 - □ Old Persian (cuneiform)
 - □ Babylonian
 - Elamite
- Impossible to reach for human beings









HERODOTUS COMPARED WITH PERSIAN SOURCES

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Herodotus on the causes of the Persian wars

Deep, long-term cause

■ Persian expansionist ambition (6.44, 6.48)

Immediate causes

- Reciprocity: Athenian participation in Ionian Revolt and burning of Sardis (5.105)
- Personal reasons: Democedes and Atossa (3.133-138), Mardonius (7.5-6), Aleuadai and Pisistratidae (7.5-6)
- Xerxes' desire to rival his ancestors (7.8)
- Divine will: dreams of Xerxes (7.12-14)



Herodotus got it right

- Expansionist ideal confirmed by inscriptions
 - Probably true that a new king faced pressure to add to the empire
- Names of important Persians confirmed by royal archives
- History of Darius' accession similar to Behistun inscription
- Some Persian customs accurately reported



Herodotus got it wrong

- Misunderstandings of custom, e.g.
 - □ King substitution
 - □ Purification of army
 - □ Purification of demonic temples
- Greek thoughts attributed to Persians, e.g.
 - ☐ The powerlessness of human beings (e.g. 9.16)
 - □ Political/constitutional theory (3.80-83)
- Many details unconfirmed or contradicted by records and archaeology, e.g.
 - □ The false Smerdis
 - Cambyses' Egyptian impiety



So:

Herodotus is a useful source for the Persian Wars, but limited by

- > Sources
- Limits of understanding
- Different interests from modern historians
- Scope for invention
- Greek philosophical thought at the time
- Intention (Homeric imitation, deeper truths, contemporary relevance)





Historicity of the *Histories*

- Based on a core of facts, but embellished (e.g. with speeches and dialogue)
- Follows local, oral tradition
 - Interesting for what it says about the selfunderstanding of various peoples
 - □ Interesting for what it says about Greek thought
- But also useful for Persia (and Egypt) as long as we remember Herodotus' limitations.