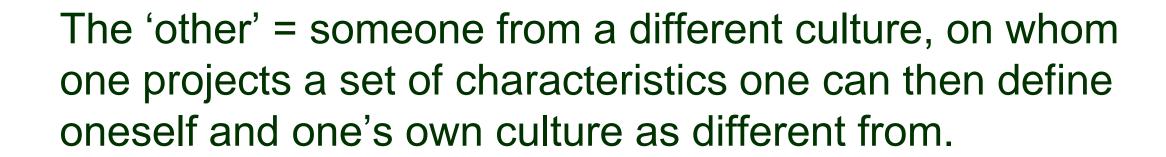
# Classical Civilisation 1A Herodotus II: Greeks and Others in the Histories

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#### Overview of lecture

- The 'other', definition
- 'Others' in Herodotus: Persians, Egyptians, Libyans,
   Scythians, Indians and Spartans
- Herodotus as ethnographical narrator/travel writer
- Different views of the 'other' in the *Histories*



#### 'OTHERS' IN THE HISTORIES



#### Persians

#### **Persians**

- Wealthy
- Enjoy luxury
- 'Slaves' to a tyrant king
  - ☐ Fight under compulsion

#### But:

- Taught 'to ride, shoot, and tell the truth'
- Some Persians are brave, many are clever

#### **Greeks**

- Poor
- Ascetic and moderate
- Free
  - Fight voluntarily

#### But:

- Some Greeks are cowards
  - □ The Greek alliance only barely holds
- The Greeks are diverse: Athenians are very different from Spartans



#### Other 'others'

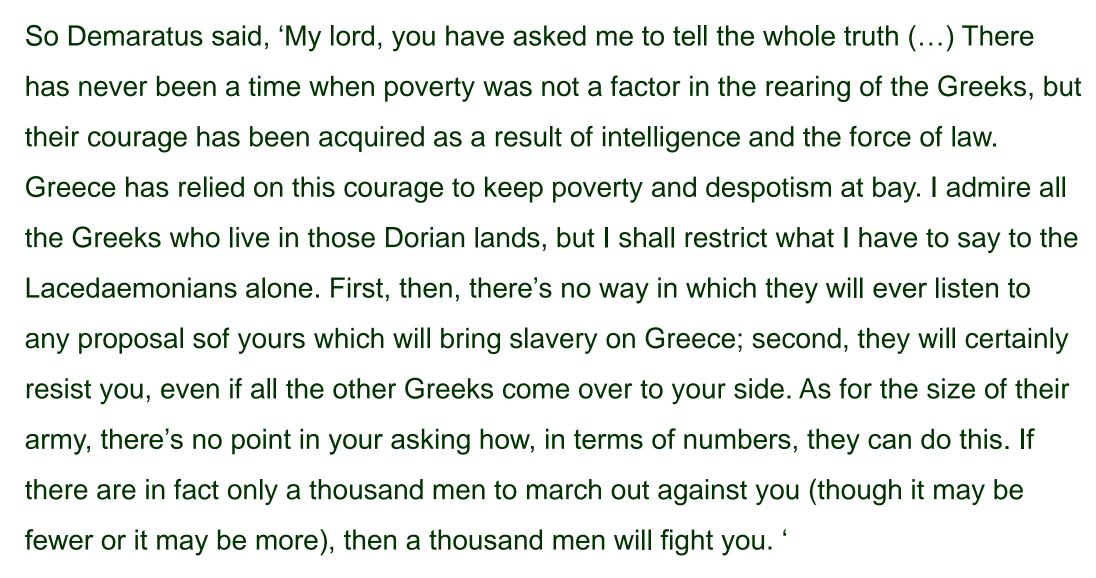
Egyptians	Libyans	Scythians	Indians
Opposite from everybody else because of climate and landscape	The most long-lived of all peoples because of climate		
Oldest culture and religion	Young, uncivilised, nomadic culture – noble savages	Young, uncivilised, nomadic culture – noble savages	Marvellous half-humans
Marvellous buildings	No buildings	No buildings	Marvels



#### Spartans

- Peculiar constitution (double kingship)
- Peculiar customs 'resemble Persian customs' (6.60)

- But when faced with Persian invasion, the Spartans become the quintessential Greek (e.g. Demaratus' explanation to Xerxes, 7.102)



Hdt. 7.102

# HERODOTUS AS (ETHNOGRAPHIC) NARRATOR

#### Ethnographic sections of the Histories

- Persia (1.131-140)
- Egypt (2.2-182)
- India (3.98-105)
- The 'extremities' (3.106-116)
- Scythia (4.1-82)
- Libya (4.168-199)
- Sparta (6.55-60)



#### Characteristics of the narrator of the *Histories*

- Overt narrator, strong presence in the text
- Eye-witness (autopsy)
- Or stresses his sources
- Argumentative, assertive



#### Autopsy and sources

'This is what <u>I heard</u> about the children and their upbringing, and <u>I heard</u> other things as well in Memphis <u>during my conversations</u> with the priests of Hephaestus. <u>The information I gained</u> there <u>led me</u> to travel to Thebes and to Heliopolis, <u>to try to find out</u> whether their accounts would agree with <u>what I had heard</u> in Memphis, because there are said to be no Egyptians more learned than the Heliopolitans.'



#### Argumentative

'My view is that they are right in saying this about the country. Even someone – a man of intelligence, at any rate – who has not already heard about it, but just uses his eyes, can easily see that the Egypt to which the Greeks sail is new land which the Egyptians have gained as a gift from the river.'



'I am sure that those who give this account of Egypt are right, and am particularly convinced of its correctness because I have seen that Egypt projects beyond the adjacent landmass, that shells appear in the mountains, that salt forms crusts on the surface of the ground and corrodes even the pyramids, and that the only sandy mountain range in Egypt is the one overlooking Memphis. Besides, I have observed the dissimilarity between Egyptian soil and that of Arabia and Libya, its neighbours, and that of Syria too'



#### Narrator persona

- Well-travelled
- Well-read
- Intelligent
- Curious and excited
- Eager to learn and eager to teach
- Likes a good story

## Herodotus in context (cf. Thomas 2000)

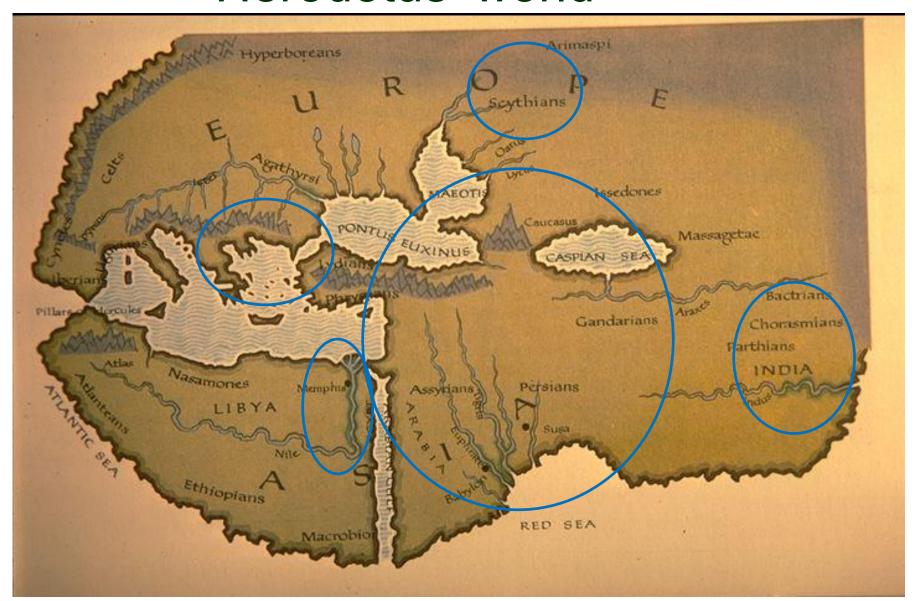
- General interest in ethnography and geography in 5<sup>th</sup> century, e.g.
  - □ Hippocratic writers (*Airs, Waters, Places*)
  - □ Dionysius of Miletus
  - ☐ Hecataeus of Miletus
- Special interest in Egypt
  - □ E.g. Hecataeus
- Interest in nomoi (laws, customs) and their relativity
  - □ E.g. Sophists
- No distinction between historiography and ethnography

#### Ethnographic themes

- in the Hippocratics and in Herodotus
  - *Thômata* (marvels) [sing. *thôma*]
  - Erga (deeds, monuments) [sing. ergon]
  - Nomoi (laws, customs) [sing. nomos]
    - Marriage and sex
    - □ Burial
    - □ Religious worship
    - □ Food and drink

- Were these categories expected by his audience?

#### Herodotus' world





#### Hellenocentrism

- Makes the unfamiliar familiar by comparisons:
  The Massagetae get drunk on the smoke of a plant just like the Greeks get drunk on wine.
- Reports many details, but does not understand underlying factors (e.g. Egyptian belief)
- Ethnography of difference
  - □ Possible to guess what the Greek norm was
  - □ Ethnography serves to create an 'Other', i.e. to define Greekness



'Now, the Persians, to my certain knowledge, have the following practices. It is not one of their customs to construct statues, temples, and altars; in fact, they count those who do so as fools, because (I suppose) they do not anthropomorphize the gods as the Greeks do. Their worship of Zeus consists in going up to the highest mountain peaks and performing sacrifices; they call the whole vault of heaven Zeus.'

(Hdt. 1.131)

#### Cultural relativism



#### One set of *nomoi* is as good as any other:

A story of how Cambyses is trying to force Indians and Greeks to swap funeral customs. Conclusion:

'Everything goes to make me certain that Cambyses was completely mad; otherwise he would not have gone in for mocking religion and tradition (nomoi). If one were to order all mankind to choose the best set of rules (nomoi) in the world, each group would, after due consideration, choose its own customs (nomoi); each group regards its own as being by far the best. So it is unlikely that anyone except a madman would laugh at such things.' (Hdt 3.38)

- Gold is only as valuable as people decide (Ethiopian perspective 3.23)
- Different things are exotic to different peoples (marvels of the extremities seem to us fine and rare, 3.116)
- The Egyptians call the Greeks *barbarians* (2.158)
- Every people prefers its own nomoi (3.38)



#### Non-supremacy of Greece

'The [Egyptian] priests also told me that the Egyptians were the first to establish the epithets of the Twelve Gods and that the Greeks got these epithets from them, and they claim to have been the first to assign the gods altars, statues, and temples and to carve figures on to stones. They actually demonstrated the validity of most of these claims.'

#### Environmental determinism



### A people's character is determined by their environment and climate:

- Rugged, infertile, poor Greece makes tough fighting men.
- In the old days, rugged, infertile, poor Persia made tough fighting men.
  - but after various conquests, the wealth and luxury turn the Persians soft.
- Ethiopians are long-lived and healthy because of the heat (2.77, 3.22)
- Egyptian customs are the reverse of those of all other peoples because their climate and topography are unique.

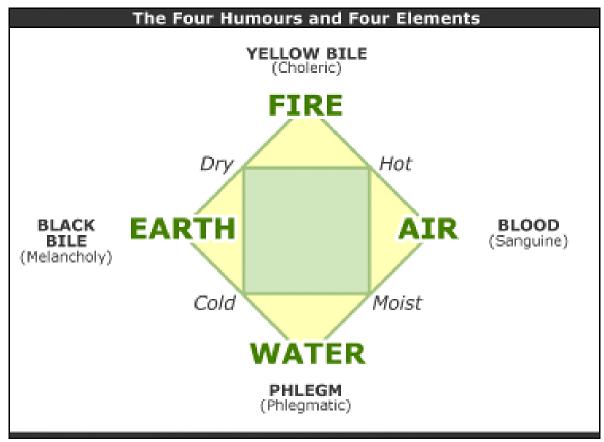


#### Ending of the *Histories*:

Artembares (...) was the author of a certain proposal which the Persians passed on to Cyrus for ratification. The proposal went like this: 'since Zeus has given sovereignty to the Persians (...), let's emigrate from the country we currently own, which is small and rugged, and take over somewhere better. (...)' Cyrus was not impressed with the proposal. He told them to go ahead – but he also advised them to be prepared, in that case, to become subjects instead of rulers, on the grounds that soft lands tend to breed soft men. It is impossible, he said, for one and the same country to produce remarkable crops and good fighting men.' (Hdt. 9.122)

#### Influenced by Greek medicine/ the Hippocratics

Four elements, four humours, four characteristics of the body and the world:



Copied from

http://medievalscience.blogspot.co.uk/2013/02/medieval-medicine-four-humours.html



But Herodotus' environmental determinism is nuanced: Climate and topography give rise to *nomoi*, which form a people.

#### E.g. the Scythians

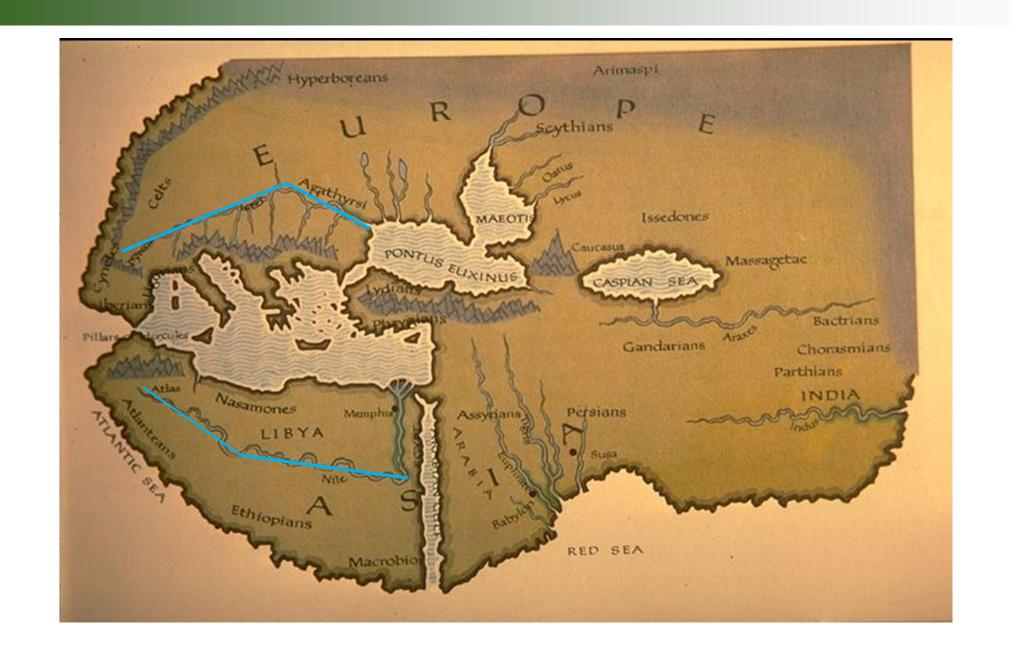
- □ Live in a cold and wet climate, but are not themselves cold and wet.
- ☐ Their land is flat and well-watered, suitable for nomadic lifestyle.
- □ This determines their way of life and way of fighting.

### Symmetrical geography



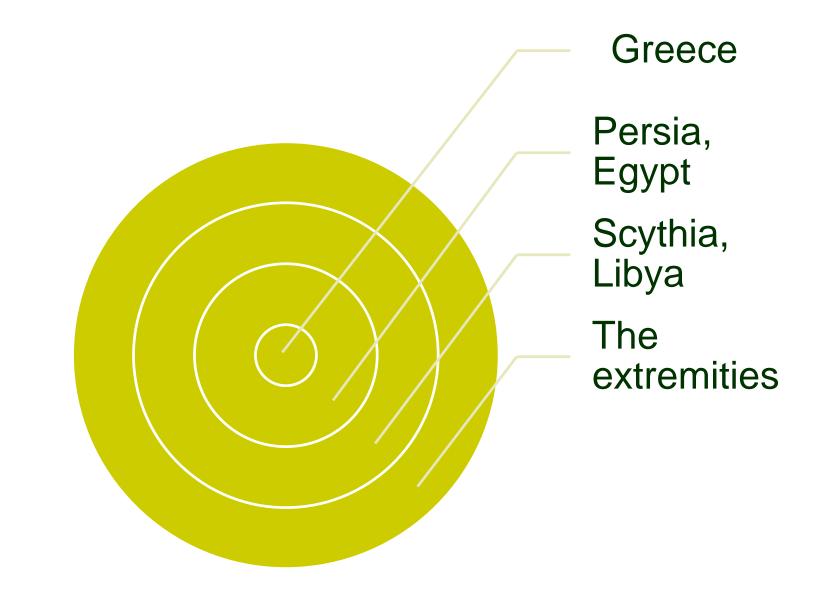
#### Symmetry of the Nile and the Ister (Danube)

'Since the Ister flows through inhabited lands, it is well known, but no one can state where the source of the Nile is, because the part of Libya through which the river flows is uninhabited desert. (...) It ends up in Egypt, which is more or less exactly opposite the mountainous part of Cilicia, and the direct route from there to Sinope on the Euxine Sea would take a man travelling light five days. Sinope in its turn is opposite were the Ister issues into the sea. This is why I think the Nile flows through the whole of Libya and is the same length as the Ister.



- Greece vs Persia
  - ☐ Hard vs soft
  - □ Rugged terrain vs fertile fields
  - □ Poverty vs luxury
  - □ Toughness vs cowardice
- Egypt/Libya vs Scythia
  - ☐ Heat vs cold
  - □ Nile vs Ister (Danube)
  - □ Oldest vs youngest people
  - Decadent civilisation vs noble savage
  - □ But Egyptian customs are opposite to the customs of all other peoples!
- Greece vs the extremities
  - □ Finely mixed seasons vs great marvels (3.106.1)

### Centrifugal geography





- 2.Persia and Egypt: a bit strange, rich and decadent, on the decline
  - 3. Libya and Scythia: very strange, nomadic tribes, noble savages, golden age
    - 4. The Extremities: absurd, often repulsive customs

This model can be seen also in also in Homer and Ctesias (Rossellini and Saïd 1978, Thomas 2000)

# Ethnography as a mirror of Greekness

#### Hartog: The Mirror of Herodotus

- The Schythians = the Other
  - □ Nomads vs. *poleis*
  - ☐ Hunting and cattle vs. agriculture
  - General savageness and outlandishness
- but become 'Greek' when facing the Persians
  - ☐ Fleeing on horseback = evacuating Athens
  - □ Leaving the land to be ravaged = leaving Athens

# Conclusion: Herodotus as ethnographic source

- Influenced by different schematic world-views, but does not subscribe to any one of them
- Can tell us a lot about the (or a) Greek world view
- An ethnography of
  - Marvels
  - Differences
  - □ Tolerance
- Many true details mixed with fantastic untrue stories