## XXIV.—Credulity and Scepticism in Herodotus

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This paper is summarized in the closing paragraph.

It is easy for the critic to insist that every historian must select his material with an eye to what is "worthy of mention" (λόγου ἄξιον) and that he must not merely reproduce current accounts of the events which he proposes to describe. In actual practice, however, it was not always easy for historical writers in the fifth century B.C. to live up to this high standard. Every historian, both ancient and modern, is limited by the nature of the evidence which is available to him; he may complain that it is inadequate and untrustworthy, but he is not entitled to suppress or distort it. Herodotus shows clearly that he recognizes these obligations when he explains that it is his duty to "record what he is told but not always to believe in it." [1] He is fully aware that some of the stories which he records may strike his readers as trivial or unbelievable. But, when he has information of some kind, however inadequate, his own uncertainty about the truth is no excuse for leaving a blank page; and he prefers to present the evidence rather than attempt some speculative reconstruction with nothing except its ingenuity to recommend it.[2]

[1] 7.152 (cf. 2.123). Probably Herodotus means this as a reply to Hecataeus, who said that he would give his own version of events relying on his own powers of criticism (Ἑκαταῖος Μιλήσιος ὧδε μυθεῖται· Τάδε γράφω, ὡς μοι δοκεῖ ἀληθέα εἶναι) and pay little attention to the "many ridiculous stories told by the Greeks" (*FGrH*, fg. 1a). Cf. Jacoby *RE s.v.* "Herodotos," Supp. 2.472–3, and W. Schmid, *PhW* (1932) 1001,2. Thucydides took up the question in his turn: οὐκ ἐκ τοῦ παρατυχόντος πυνθανόμενος ἠξίωσα γράφειν, οὐδ' ὡς ἐμοὶ ἐδόκει (1.22.2). In this general criticism of his predecessors Thucydides almost certainly means to include Hecataeus and to complain of his method as "arbitrary" (not "rationalistic," which is the term sometimes used by modern critics to describe it).

[2] For a radically different interpretation of his procedure see K. M. T. Chrimes, "Herodotus and the reconstruction of history," *JHS* 50 (1930) 89–98. This article attributes to Hdt. an astonishing κακοήθεια in manipulating his evidence—something beyond even the wildest dreams of his ancient critics. Cf. also P. Treves, "Herodotus, Gelon, and Pericles," *CPh* 36 (1941) 321–45 ,and K. Pagel, *Die Bedeutung des aitiologischen Moments für Herodots Geschichtschreibung* (Diss. Berlin, 1927—not accessible to me, but quoted with approval by W. Schmid, *Griech. Literaturgesch.* 1.2.594); these writers think that Hdt. is capable of faking incidents for propaganda purposes or in order to provide an excuse for a digression.

Herodotus frequently discusses conflicting versions of a story which are current among different groups of people. But, like other Greek historians of the classical period, he is not particularly conscientious in revealing his debt to the work of his predecessors. Great efforts were made at one time to discover what different sources he used and the literature on the subject is extensive. Some scholars affected to believe that he deliberately deceived his readers into thinking that he had obtained most of his information by word of mouth and they argued that a good proportion of his travels was carried out in his own study.[3] Others, misled by the charges of plagiarism which late Greek writers made against him, supposed that he was capable of copying slavishly from earlier written works.[4] But the only work from which it is certain that Herodotus copied actual passages is Hecataeus' *Periegesis;*[5] though he was probably familiar with and influenced by other contemporary historical works, there is no proof of direct borrowing and all arguments about his use of written sources apart from Hecataeus are of an extremely speculative nature.

It is, therefore, unlikely that any satisfactory conclusions about his critical ability can be reached by a study of his sources. But even if he had supplied us with a complete set of footnotes, giving us the references to his sources,[6] it would still be necessary for us to base our estimate of his credulity on the text alone. It is not enough for us to know that he trusted one authority and distrusted another, unless we also know his reasons for making such distinctions.

[3] The best known exponent of this type of criticism is A. H. Sayce, in the introduction to his edition of Books I–III. Other good examples of it may be found in H. Panofsky, *Quaestionum de historiae Herodoteae fontibus pars prior* (Diss. Berlin, 1885) and (more recently) W. A. Heidel, "Hecataeus and the Egyptian priests in Herodotus Book II," *Memoirs of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, 18.2 (1935) 53–134.

[4] A. Hauvette, *Hérodote, historien des guerres médiques* (Paris, 1894) 158–80, offers some sound criticism of those who tried to represent Hdt. as very closely dependent on his written sources; his case has not been weakened by more recent writings. E. Stemplinger's book, *Das Plagiat in der griech. Literatur* (Leipzig—Berlin, 1912), is not particularly helpful.

[5] For example, his description of the phoenix, the hippopotamus, and the methods of crocodile hunting are supposed to be taken from Hecataeus (2.70–73—*FGrH*, Hecat. fg. 324). Here we have not only the statement of Porphyry but also the evidence of the style to guide us. Cf. H. Fränkel, "Eine Stileigenheit der frühgriechischen Literatur," *NGG* (1924) 87–90. For similar stylistic evidence of borrowing in the treatment of Libya see A. Grosskinsky, "Zu Herodots Periegese Libyens," *H* 66 (1931) 362–67.

[6] Such "footnotes" as Hdt. does give in indication of his sources are conveniently collected by A. von Gutschmid in a so-called *Index fontium Herodoti*, in his *Kleine Schriften* (Leipzig, 1893) 4.145–182. Cf. also Jacoby, *RE* Supp. 2.398–9.

In fact, however, he does not very frequently tell us what his reasons were for accepting or rejecting something he had heard or read. There are many occasions when he admits he cannot be sure of the truth, whether because no information is available or because conflicting accounts are offered. But the accounts and explanations of events which he offers without expressing any critical opinion far outnumber those which he doubts or refuses to believe. It should not, however, be supposed that every one of these statements represents a careful and considered judgment, reached by independent critical thought. We must not expect his standards to be the same as those of the twentieth century. There were many external influences which affected his judgment, in particular the current fashions of his day, in literary taste and style as well as in morals, religion, and politics.

For example, it is well known that he appears to accept the authority of the Delphians as a trustworthy guarantee for the truth of a story.[7] Even the tale of the Persian march on Delphi and the manner in which the god drove back the invaders, despite its miraculous elements, is told without any hint of scepticism.[8] The rocks which fell from Parnassus and caused a panic in the ranks of the Persians were still to be seen in his day, he says, in the precinct of Athena Pronaea;[9] and the various portents and marvels, though they are characterized as *τέρεα* and *θώματα*, are related as undoubted fact. Nor is this surprising; to doubt the story or try to rationalize it would serve no purpose and would certainly offend a great many people. It is the same with Lycurgus' visit to Delphi and the fetters which the Spartans took with them on their unsuccessful attempt to conquer Tegea.[10] The story was a good one and nothing was to be gained by explaining it away; in fact, to explain it away in any satisfactory manner would involve a degree of rationalism greater than custom permitted. The current accounts (*τὰ λεγόμενα*) were acceptable both to literary taste and religious sentiment. It was necessary for him, therefore, either to record them or to ignore them altogether. Thucydides, in all probability, would have chosen the latter alternative.

[7] Cf. 1.20: *Δελφῶν οἶδα ἐγὼ οὕτω ἀκούσας γενέσθαι*. The whole story of Croesus is to a great extent built upon the information given to him at Delphi (cf. esp. 1.51, 85). For a similar trust in the authority of Dodona cf. 2.52 (though a religious question is involved here).

[8] 8.36–39.

[9] 8.39.

[10] 1.65–68.

On many occasions Herodotus cites an account of some event in a city's history which is current in the city itself. He nowhere expresses the view that such stories are more likely to be accurate than versions offered by foreigners; but he most commonly refrains from critical comment on a story which is told by "the inhabitants themselves"; evidently, if their version is incorrect, he will expect them to take the blame for their ignorance or dishonesty and disclaim all responsibility himself. Accordingly, if the Cnidians themselves explain that they were prevented from completing the canal through their isthmus by the opposition of the gods,[11] they are fully entitled to do so. The portents which they relate are not beyond the bounds of belief. It is only when people overstep these bounds that Herodotus feels obliged to protest, for fear that his readers will think him a simpleton.[12] Such protests are more often needed in dealing with the accounts of barbarians, since Greek readers cannot in such cases be guided by their familiarity with the conventions of folk-lore and pious belief. For example, he openly refuses to believe the statement of the Chaldaean priests in Babylon that "the god himself visits the temple and reposes on the couch."[13] But it is neither necessary nor proper for him to protest against stories which Greeks tell of a god appearing on earth among them. He is somewhat disgusted by the trick of Peisistratus, who dressed up a woman in the guise of Athena, in order to give the impression that he was returning to Athens under divine escort; he thinks that the Athenians should not have tolerated such play-acting;[14] but it is quite a mistake to suppose that he finds fault with them for believing that Pan appeared to Pheidippides.[15]

[11] 1.174.

[12] E.g. 5.86: the Aeginetans say that the statues fell on their knees when the Athenians tried to drag them away—*ἐμοὶ μὲν οὐ πιστὰ λέγοντες, ἄλλῳ δέ τεῳ.*

[13] 1.182. Likewise he entirely rejects the Scythian tradition that the founder of their race was a son of Zeus by the daughter of the River Borysthenes (4.5); if a Greek city had some similar tradition about its founder, it would have been a breach of good manners to question it.

[14] 1.60: *μηχανῶνται δὴ ἐπὶ τῇ κατόδῳ πρῆγμα εὐηθέστατον, ὡς ἐγὼ εὑρίσκω, μακρῷ (ἐπεί γε ἀπεκρίθη ἐκ παλαιτέρου τοῦ βαρβάρου ἔθνεος τὸ Ἑλληνικὸν ἐὸν καὶ δεξιώτερον καὶ εὐηθίης ἠλιθίου ἀπηλλαγμένον μᾶλλον), εἰ καὶ τότε γε οὗτοι ἐν Ἀθηναίοισι τοῖσι πρώτοισι λεγομένοισι εἶναι Ἑλλήνων σοφίην μηχανῶνται τοιάδε.* The scorn of Hdt. is shown clearly enough by the recurrence of *γε* and *δή*.

[15] 6.105: *καὶ ταῦτα μὲν Ἀθηναῖοι, καταστάντων σφι εὖ ἤδη τῶν πρηγμάτων, πιστεύσαντες εἶναι ἀληθέα ἱδρύσαντο ὑπὸ τῇ ἀκροπόλι Πανὸς ἱρόν, καὶ αὐτὸν ἀπὸ ταύτης τῆς ἀγγελίης θυσίῃσι ἐπετείοισι καὶ λαμπάδι ἱλάσκονται.* H. Panitz, *Mythos und Orakel bei Herodot* (*Greifswälder Beiträge zur Literatur- und Stilforschung* 7 [1935]) thinks Hdt. is

Rather than attempt to disentangle the various sources of Herodotus and analyze his attitude towards them, it seems preferable to examine his manner of criticizing reports on different topics and, in cases where he argues the point, to notice what considerations seem most to influence his judgment. It is important, however, that the argument be restricted to topics on which he was free to make up his own mind. In dealing with dreams, portents, oracles, and tales of divine interference, he was not always free to exercise independent criticism even if he had wanted to do so.[16] He is well aware, when he ventures on some theological discussion, that he is on dangerous ground.[17] We find the same absence of criticism when he is recounting some continuous *logos* in which the character and career of a well-known personality are illustrated; on such occasions he may forget that he is an historian and become quite frankly a *logopoios*, more concerned to tell a consistent story and to exploit its dramatic possibilities fully than to make sure of its accuracy in every detail.[18] It is perfectly true that his appearance of naive credulity in face of some reports is inconsistent with his air of critical scepticism in other matters. But this inconsistency is not in the least surprising. It shows us that Herodotus shared the prejudices and accepted the conventions of his time and was not willing to offend the sensibilities of his readers or disappoint them in their appetite for the marvellous and the sensational (*τὸ μυθῶδες*). This was the point on which Thucydides took issue with him; he was less accommodating than Herodotus in his regard for the literary taste and superstitious inclinations of the general public; and consequently we are less likely to find him inconsistent in his application of criticism.[19]

mocking the Athenians for this belief and that, because he rejects the tale of the Chaldaean priests, he disbelieves in *all* stories of gods appearing to men (pp. 11, 18). This argument is quite unsound. A similar view, however, was expressed by older German critics: e.g. O. Rentzsch, *Herodots Stellung zum alten Mythus* (*Programm der Annenschule, Dresden*, 1892) 12–14.

[16] For an excellent though brief discussion of the attitude of Hdt. towards the supernatural see Ph. E. Legrand, *Hérodote* (Budé edition), *Introduction*, 84–87.

[17] Cf. 2.45 and the remarks of I. M. Linforth, "Herodotus' avowal of silence in his account of Egypt," *Univ. of California Publications in Class. Phil.* 7.281–82. See also Jacoby, *RE* Supp. 2.479–81.

[18] This is pointed out by M. Pohlenz, *Herodot, der erste Geschichtschreiber des Abendlandes* (Leipzig—Berlin, 1937), who represents Hdt. as torn between the rival attractions of *logos* and *historia*. Though this psychological explanation may not be sound, the distinction between the two aspects of his work is an important one.

[19] In 1.21.1 he carefully distinguishes himself from the logographers, who put together their material *ἐπὶ τὸ προσαγωγότερον τῇ ἀκροάσει ἢ ἀληθέστερον, ὄντα ἀνεξέλεγκτα*

Since, therefore, Herodotus shows so much consideration for the literary and religious conventions of his day, it is not worth while to attempt any general discussion of his credulity. But it is possible that we shall be conducting a more useful experiment in criticism if we ignore matters that involve religious and superstitious belief and examine his attitude towards reports that deal with more strictly secular matters.[20] Naturally, there is a large choice of available subjects and it is necessary to make a selection. The discussion which follows will be concerned with his attitude towards reports on the following subjects: the national customs of barbarian peoples; the geography of strange lands; the phenomena of natural history; the personal lives of public men and their influence on national policy; the motives assigned for an action, when the action itself is an acknowledged fact; the stories of atrocities, which are inevitably spread abroad in time of war, and, corresponding with them, the tales of Greek heroism. Every age of history produces exaggerated and inexact reports on such topics as these and the historian of every period is equally obliged to pick his way warily among them. Our present concern, it should be noted, is not to examine the accuracy of his reports in the light of further evidence now available to us; we are not concerned with the credibility of his narrative, but with his credulity—and there are occasions when a man may properly be blamed for believing the true version or rejecting the false.

In describing the customs of a barbarian people Herodotus usually makes no reference to any authority and indeed he often contrives to give the impression that his knowledge is the result of personal observation. The exception is when the custom is so extraordinary that he cannot record it as established fact—for example, the cannibalistic customs of the Issedones and the Indian Padaei.[21] Whatever the real source of information may be in each particular case, he sees no necessity to question it so long as the report seems reasonable; he doubts it only when it passes the bounds of probability. For this procedure he offers no apology and evi-

*καὶ τὰ πολλὰ ὑπὸ χρόνου αὐτῶν ἐπὶ τὸ μυθῶδες ἐκνενικηκότα.* And again in 1.22.4 he writes of his own work: *καὶ ἐς μὲν ἀκρόασιν ἴσως τὸ μὴ μυθῶδες αὐτῶν ἀτερπέστερον φανεῖται.*

[20] Cf. J. Geffcken, *Griech. Literaturgesch.* 1.283: "Auf neutralem Gebiet aber, wo ihn weder Gott noch Moral hemmt, kann H. der Sophistik der Zeit freien Eingang gestatten."

[21] 4.26; 3.99.

dently does not intend to give the impression that he regards some sources as more trustworthy than others. The only notable departure from his usual method is in his account of the northern peoples. He makes it clear that when Aristeas has to fall back on the account given him by the Issedones (these supposed cannibals who are said to be honest law-abiding men in other respects), he cannot accept his word any longer; he likewise rejects the supposed statement of the bald-headed men that goat-footed people live in the mountains to the north of them.[22] But as far as these bald-headed men (who "are said to be all bald from childhood up, men and women alike, while they are snub-nosed and have long beards")—up to this point "there is no mystery about the nature of the country or the tribes which inhabit it, since some of the Scythians travel into their territory, and it is easy to obtain information from them, and also some of the Greeks from the Borysthenes trading centre and the other Pontic trading stations; and the Scythians who go among them transact their business by means of seven interpreters speaking seven different languages." [23] Here he has revealed very clearly his reason for accepting, in general, the reports he has heard: if they were faulty, they would long since have been contradicted or corrected by some of the travellers who knew the country. Modern travellers would not agree that his assumption is justified, since false reports often continue to circulate even when there are people available who can give information at first hand (*τῶν οὐ χαλεπόν ἐστι πυθέσθαι*).[24]

In reporting the customs of the Persians, Herodotus makes it clear when he is speaking on his own authority: "I know that they observe the following customs"; "these things I can say with certainty about them from personal knowledge." [25] There are, on the other hand, some customs about which he is not so sure (*τάδε μέντοι ὡς κρυπτόμενα λέγεται*), such as the practice of leaving a dead body to be mutilated by a dog or bird of prey before burying it; but he "knows for certain" that the magi have this practice and

[22] 4.16, 24.

[23] 4.24. For a discussion of this trade see R. Hennig, "Herodots Handelsweg zu den sibirischen Issedonen," *Kl* 28 (1935) 242–254.

[24] An apt example of dispute on topographical questions where "the facts" should not be hard to establish is to be found in the controversy about Hannibal's route across the Alps. See especially the "Counterblast to Critics" in C. Torr's booklet *Hannibal crosses the Alps* (ed. 2, Cambridge, 1925).

[25] 1.131, 140.

make no secret about observing it.[26] Again, in explaining why the Persians do not make images of their gods, he falls back on his own opinion (ὡς μὲν ἐμοὶ δοκέειν) that they disapprove of images because they do not regard their gods as possessed of human form.[27] It would of course have been tactless and impertinent to question a Persian too closely on such a delicate point of religious belief; Herodotus was certainly well aware that foreigners might be unwilling to discuss a ἱρὸς λόγος with a stranger.

His cautious attitude towards reports of Persian customs is very different from his manner in describing Lydian institutions. He says that their customs are similar to those of the Greeks, except that the girls in all families of the people obtain money for their dowries by the practice of prostitution.[28] For this custom, however, he does not offer general poverty as an excuse, as he does for the Babylonians, nor is any religious explanation given, like the Mylitta worship which obliged every Babylonian woman once in her life to have intercourse with a stranger;[29] in fact, he does not suggest any parallel between the Lydian and Babylonian customs.[30] His account of this curious social institution is the more suspicious because he mentions it to explain the inscription on the so-called tomb of Alyattes; according to the inscription, as it was interpreted to him, these girls were responsible for the largest share of the work needed to build the monument. He neither suggests nor denies that things may have changed in Lydia, as the Lydian people became more hellenized (a point on which information was easily available), but seems to accept without question the interpretation of this inscription which was given him by his guide. It is true that he is, in general, too readily satisfied with the interpretations offered by guides of inscriptions which he cannot read himself.[31]

[26] 1.140.

[27] 1.131.

[28] 1.93–94.

[29] Since the ruin of Babylon after the Persian conquest πᾶς τις τοῦ δήμου βίου σπανίζων καταπορνεύει τὰ θήλεα τέκνα (1.196.5). Cf. the wording of 1.93: τοῦ γὰρ δὴ Λυδῶν δήμου αἱ θυγατέρες πορνεύονται πᾶσαι. For the Mylitta worship see 1.199. The word πᾶσαι is very important in 1.93. Reports of Anatolian tribes, in which prostitution is regarded as an honourable occupation (Cf. Str. 11.14.16), may explain how this story originated, but they do not corroborate his version that it was true of all Lydian families.

[30] But cf. G. Radet, *La Lydie et le monde grec au temps des Mermnades* (Paris, 1893) 299.

[31] Cf. for example the so-called Sesostris statues in 2.106, which he says he saw himself and identifies as Egyptian statues, despite their obviously non-Egyptian

In this case, however, a special reason for his credulity may be found in the contempt which the Greeks in Asia Minor felt for their supposedly effeminate barbarian neighbours; this prejudice seems to have gone back beyond the fifth century and it would be likely to render him less critical in accepting reports of their loose morals.[32]

One might compare with this report of Lydian customs the only libellous tale about Persian institutions which is accepted by Herodotus. He remarks that "it is a Persian practice to bury people alive," as an explanation of two supposed instances of this form of human sacrifice.[33] This shows clearly the influence of an anti-Persian animosity, which he resists in his earlier books; his accounts of Persian atrocities do not, as a rule, affect his general estimate of Persian character and customs; he does not regard the king as typical of the Persian people.

With respect to the wilder and more remote barbarian tribes it was naturally difficult for Herodotus to know how much he should believe. It is noteworthy, however, that he is ready to believe almost anything with regard to their religious beliefs and customs of sacrifice. He does not doubt the cruelty of the Scythians towards captives, slaves, false prophets, and those who attempt to introduce foreign customs;[34] and he believes that they never wash themselves with water.[35] He even believes that the Tauri, famous for their hatred of strangers and well known from the tale of Iphi-

character, which was recognized long before they were known to be Hittite. Cf. also the monument which was supposed to commemorate the trick of Darius' groom (3.85–88); it is fairly clear that the story was invented to explain the monument. See W. Spiegelberg, *The credibility of Herodotus' account of Egypt*, trans. A. M. Blackman (Oxford, 1927), 15–16, 20–27.

[32] In 1.155 Croesus advises Cyrus to disarm the Lydians and encourage them to take up the wearing of fine clothes, music, and "trading among themselves" (καπηλεύειν): "and before long, o king, you will find they have become women instead of men, and you need have no fear that they will rebel." The earlier reputation of the Lydians for ἁβροσύνη is best attested by the line of Xenophanes (fg. 3, Diehl):

ἁβροσύνας δὲ μαθόντες ἀνωφελέας παρὰ Λυδῶν.

For other references see C. M. Bowra, "Xenophanes, Fragment 3," *CQ* 35 (1941) 123 and add Xanthus, fg. 19 (*FHG* 1.39). A parallel from modern satire is offered in Act II of C. K. Munro's play *At Mrs. Beam's* (New York, 1926): the London boarding-house dwellers are easily convinced that marriage is an obsolete institution outside Great Britain.

[33] 7.114.

[34] 4.2, 69, 72, 76–80. This paper is not concerned with the actual accuracy of these and other reports.

[35] 4.75.

geneia, have accepted themselves the Greek identification of their goddess with the daughter of Agamemnon;[36] it is easy to understand how such a report could have developed, with traders telling the Tauri about Iphigeneia and establishing friendly relations by affecting to understand their hatred of foreigners; but Herodotus is certainly very careless in believing that the Tauri really incorporated Greek mythology into their religion. At the same time, whatever he may believe about the religious ideas and practices of the Neuri, he does not accept their tale of were-wolves—even though Greeks in Scythia swear that the tales are true;[37] this was not a type of superstition that appealed to him at all.

Since his account of the Massagetae[38] follows upon the narrative of Cyrus' disastrous expedition into their country, there was a good reason for accepting all the more gruesome customs attributed to them; the tragedy of Cyrus' fate would be spoiled if the barbaric character of this nomad people were minimized. Thus he describes their lavish use of bronze and gold, their loose marriage customs, and their habit of killing and eating the aged members of a clan without the hesitation which he shows in face of similar reports in Book IV. This is one example of his tendency to be less critical when a touch of scepticism would spoil the dramatic effect of his story.

Whenever Herodotus gives an account of barbarian customs, it is necessary to note both the context in which it occurs and the opportunity which he has had to verify the reports given to him. In Egypt he makes it quite clear what his opportunities have been. But his account of the Libyan tribes in Book IV is probably taken over in great part from Hecataeus[39] and he has no independent evidence with which to check the reports of his predecessor. He interjects an occasional "as it is said," to indicate that much of what he records is hard to believe; but on the whole his account is quite uncritical. At one point, however, he shows his appreciation of the difference between a custom that any observer could notice for himself—"the women of the Gindanes each wear a number of anklets"—and its meaning—"as it is said, a woman wears an anklet

[36] 4.103.

[37] 4.105.

[38] 1.215–16.

[39] Cf. F. Jacoby, *FGrH* 1.371–72; L. Pearson, *Early Ionian historians* (Oxford, 1939) 90–96.

for each man who has been her lover and the woman with the greatest number of anklets is the most highly esteemed, as loved by the greatest number of men." [40] So also, he recognizes as fact the disaster that overtook the Psylli, but is not quite so sure that their mass migration was really an expedition against the south wind—"I am reporting what the Libyans say." [41] This distinction between an externally observable fact and the interpretation of an action or the motive which inspires it is, of course, fundamentally important for any historian. It will be worth while to find out how consistently Herodotus makes this distinction in recording the actions of individuals as well as the customs of nations.[42]

The credulity of Herodotus with regard to barbarian customs is matched by an intermittent scepticism in geographical matters. His usual attitude is shown in his statement (already quoted) about the northern peoples: as far as the bald-headed people, he thinks, there is no difficulty in obtaining information about the country, since it is visited by both Greeks and Scythians, who can easily be consulted.[43] He is equally confident in speaking about the course of the Danube: "Its course is through inhabited country and it is well known to many people" [44]—a statement which does not alter the fact that he is really quite ignorant about the course of this river. On the other hand, he is extremely severe in his criticism of those who pretend to have knowledge of the Eridanus and the western ocean, because he can find no evidence that the reports are based on actual observation rather than on mythological tradition.[45] He admits that many of the most valuable products come from the farthest corners of the world; he knows that there is a trade in amber and tin from the distant north and west; [46] but he seems to know nothing about the traders in these materials or even about the importers and he never suggests that they might have illuminating information to give about the peoples and the countries from which they obtained their goods. On the contrary, he seems prepared to regard the northwest as unknown country because no Ionian writers have dealt with it adequately and the knowledge of mer-

[40] 4.176.
[41] 4.173.
[42] See below pages 352–354.
[43] 4.24.
[44] 2.33–34.
[45] 3.115.
[46] 3.106, 115.

chants has not yet been passed on to literary men. Many people think that Herodotus was a merchant; but in writing about the northwest he shows none of the knowledge of trading conditions that one would expect from a man of business.[47]

His information about the distant Indian tribes is supposed to come from a Persian source; and, fantastic though much of it is, it seems to satisfy him.[48] He seems equally satisfied with the schematic grouping of the Libyan tribes, which probably comes from Hecataeus. In fact, his geographical scepticism seems to be confined to the distant parts of Europe. What can be the reason for this? Can it be that he was antagonized by the tales of feathers and bees blocking the traveller's way and griffins guarding the gold of the far north?[49] But he was perfectly capable of rationalizing these tales, and indeed they are no more fantastic than those of the giant ants of India.[50] He is irritated by the maps of "the Ionians," with their neat arrangement of the ocean surrounding a carefully rounded world, but their schematic arrangement of the Libyan tribes is just as suspiciously artificial. The truth seems to be that he is no more consistent in his critical attitude towards geographical reports than towards accounts of barbarian customs. The only distinct tendency which can be noticed is a greater readiness to believe reports about peoples and regions with which Persian authorities have come into contact.

So far as natural history is concerned, Herodotus makes no pretence of being an expert and does not apparently even recognize that others may have greater knowledge and experience than he has; not even in Egypt or Babylon does he suggest that there may have been such persons. More than this, it is clear that he has no power of independent observation and makes no attempt to verify with his own eyes what he has been told about the birds, beasts, and plants of any particular land. No doubt, he thought it unnecessary to check the information that he was given; when the opportunity of verifying it was easily available, it did not seem likely that anyone would give false reports. In the same way, he failed to con-

[47] Cf. e.g. T. R. Glover, *Herodotus* (Berkeley, 1924) 115–119. Jacoby, however, remarks that Hdt. shows no special "kaufmännische Züge" (*RE* Supp. 2.248).

[48] 3.106.

[49] 4.7, 13; 5.10.

[50] 3.102. For an interpretation of both tales see R. Hennig, "Herodots 'goldhütende Greifen' und 'goldgrabende Ameisen,'" *RhM* 79 (1930) 326–32.

sult the men who traded with the Scythian tribes of the interior, "from whom it was easy to inquire."

Of course, observation is not always such an easy matter. We can hardly expect Herodotus to examine a crocodile or a hippopotamus closely, in order to see if the account given by Hecataeus was accurate;[51] and, if he did not know the language, it would have been difficult to learn much from the native hunters. In the case of the ibis, however, his negligence is less excusable. He says the Egyptians did not contradict the story that it destroys snakes (here at least is a topic on which he did question some native of the country); but in describing the bird he omits the most essential part: the size and strength of its bill.[52] The story of the phoenix he does not believe and he says plainly that he has not seen the bird except in pictures.[53] The bears in Egypt, he admits, are scarce; he surely should have known that the Egyptian countryside was scarcely a likely place in which to find them, but, no doubt, he saw them represented in paintings and took it for granted that they were known within the country.[54] As for the self-immolation of the cats,[55] he does not indicate where his information came from, but he does not say that he actually watched a fire in order to verify the truth of the report. It is also very clear that he did not make the experiment of using a fishing net to protect himself against mosquitoes; he seems quite prepared to believe that, for some mysterious reason, they "never even try" to penetrate such a net.[56]

His credulity in matters of natural history could be further illustrated by passages from Books III and IV and it seems evident that the lack of any habit of observation made him astonishingly gullible. For example, he says that "at a place in Arabia which was about opposite to the city of Buto" (κατὰ Βουτοῦν πόλιν μάλιστά κῃ κείμενος) he made inquiries about the winged snakes which the ibises were supposed to kill as they approached Egypt; and he was easily convinced that some heaps of bones were the remains of these winged snakes.[57] His carelessness in reporting what he had actually

[51] 2.68, 71. Cf. Jacoby's note on Hecat., fg. 324. He is equally uncritical in accepting the account of the fish-spawning (2.93).

[52] 2.75–76.

[53] 2.73.

[54] 2.67. Cf. the note of How & Wells.

[55] 2.66.

[56] 2.95.

[57] 2.75.

seen is best exemplified by his inaccurate report about Elephantine, which distressed some critics so much that they did not believe he had ever been there, despite his own explicit statement.[58]

Strabo, who read the history of Herodotus from the point of view of a geographer, is extremely scornful about the various marvels which he relates so uncritically; and most of the adverse criticism of the historian in ancient times is directed against his accounts of the wonders of the world.[59] A good proportion of this criticism is justified, and, even though there are some instances where Herodotus has turned out unexpectedly to be in the right,[60] this reflects more credit on his informants than on himself. On the other hand, the charges made against him in the *De malignitate Herodoti* have not met with a very favourable reception. The pages which follow will show that he is much less ready to believe gossip about statesmen and generals than strange tales about barbarian tribal customs and phenomena of natural history.

One of the legacies which historians inherited from the epic tradition was a delight in the exploits of individuals in battle. An account of a great struggle was not complete without a description of some acts of individual heroism and the award of a prize for bravery to an individual fighter. Herodotus therefore tells us how "after the division of the loot the Greeks sailed to the Isthmus, in order to award the prize to the man who had shown himself the worthiest of the Greeks in this war"; and each general awarded himself the first prize and the second prize to Themistocles.[61]

In peace, likewise, history craves its heroes and villains, often at the expense of accuracy. One of the tasks of the historian is to estimate the value of stories which give to a popular hero like Themistocles the credit that perhaps really belongs to a more obscure personage. Since Herodotus is well aware that anecdotes are often invented mischievously (like the tale of the flight of

[58] 2.29: *μέχρι μὲν Ἐλεφαντίνης πόλιος αὐτόπτης ἐλθών*. Sayce thought that this was a deliberate lie told by Hdt. ("The Season and Extent of the Travels of Herodotus in Egypt," *JPh* 14 [1885] 257–86. Cf. his note on Hdt. 2.29). His arguments are answered by C. Sourdille, *La durée et l'étendue du voyage d'Hérodote en Égypte* (Paris 1910) 100–145. For a useful summary of the controversy see Ph. E. Legrand, *Hérodote, Histoires* 2, pp. 25–29.

[59] Str. 11.6. 2–3; 12.3.21; Arist. *HA*. 6.31, p. 579b (cf. Hdt. 3.108).

[60] Cf. W. Spiegelberg, *op. cit*. 32–35.

[61] 8.123 (for the awarding of *aristeia* cf. Pl. *Smp*. 220d). The discussion as to who won the prize of bravery at Plataea is represented as a mere private argument, a λέσχη (9.71).

Adeimantus before Salamis)[62] or in order to flatter a great man (like the various tales of Cyrus' birth),[63] it is worth while to find out what standards he seems to follow in accepting or rejecting current gossip about both friend and enemy. Like the modern journalist, he likes to enrich his narrative with "a story which is going the rounds" (*ἔστι δὲ καὶ ὅδε ὁ λόγος λεγόμενος*). The question is how much faith he puts in gossip and rumour of this sort.

Some stories, of course, he tells purely for their dramatic value and he expects us to understand that they are told in order to point a moral and that their accuracy in detail is a matter of small importance. The conversations of Xerxes with Demaratus belong in that category, since they are designed to make it clear that the Persian king did not comprehend the Greek way of life or Greek patriotic ideals.[64] If Herodotus found them already fully composed in the memoirs of a certain Dicaeus, as has been suggested,[65] Dicaeus must have meant them to serve the same purpose. It is the same with the tale of Solon and Croesus, which would have the same value if it were presented as a frankly "imaginary conversation," or the tale of Polycrates and his ring.[66] It is of little importance whether Herodotus declares himself ready to believe such stories as these; but he ought to show himself more critical, if a story is to be made the basis for a subsequent judgment.

Among tales of personal responsibility, whether for good or evil, which Herodotus appears ready to accept without question, the following may be mentioned: Croesus is made responsible for the Persian policy of disarming the Lydians and destroying their military qualities (1.155–56); it is Atossa, at the instance of the physician Democedes, who persuades Darius to invade Greece (3.133–34); and later on it is Mardonius who persuades Xerxes (7.5–6); Syloson the Samian, the brother of Polycrates, who once presented his cloak to Darius, asked the king to restore him to his native country and is therefore made responsible for the Persian

[62] 8.94: *τούτους μὲν τοιαύτη φάτις ἔχει ὑπὸ Ἀθηναίων, οὐ μέντοι αὐτοί γε Κορίνθιοι ὁμολογέουσι, ἀλλ' ἐν πρώτοισι σφέας αὐτοὺς τῆς ναυμαχίης νομίζουσι γενέσθαι· μαρτυρέει δέ σφι καὶ ἡ ἄλλη Ἑλλάς.*

[63] 1.95: *ὡς ὦν Περσέων μετεξέτεροι λέγουσι οἱ μὴ βουλόμενοι σεμνοῦν τὰ περὶ Κῦρον, ἀλλὰ τὸν ἐόντα λέγειν λόγον, κατὰ ταῦτα γράψω, ἐπιστάμενος περὶ Κύρου καὶ τριφασίας ἄλλας λόγων ὁδοὺς φῆναι.*

[64] 7.101–104; 209.

[65] Cf. P. Trautwein, "Die Memoiren des Dikaios," *H* 25 (1890) 527–66; G. Mathieu, "Une source d'Hérodote: Dikaios d'Athènes," *REA* 33 (1931) 97–108.

[66] 1.30–33; 3.40–43.

attack on Samos (3.139–41); Zopyrus, by his stratagem, enables Darius to conquer Babylon (3.153–60); Histiaeus is responsible for the decision of the Ionians not to destroy the bridge over the Ister (4.137); Aristagoras is responsible for the Persian expedition against Naxos (5.31–32); Miltiades is responsible for the Athenian decision to attack at Marathon (6.109–10); Themistocles, bribed by the Euboeans, prevents the fleet from withdrawing from Artemisium (8.5); and it is the message of Themistocles which really brings on the battle of Salamis, by persuading Xerxes to cut off the retreat of the Greek fleet (8.75–76).

Some of these stories the modern historian is inclined to reject without ceremony. The part played by Atossa in persuading Darius to invade Greece is suspect, because it conforms to a type of humorous anecdote in which the emperor or general who commands many thousands of men is shown as yielding to a woman's slightest wish. The tale of Zopyrus is suspect because it has many features which belong to the repertory of oriental folk-lore;[67] and the story of Aristagoras has similar suspicious elements, like the slave sent by Histiaeus with a message inscribed on his scalp.[68] As for stories about the cleverness of Themistocles, these grew up so quickly that there is no reason to trust those recorded by Herodotus any more than those which appear for the first time in Plutarch.

How should we explain the fact that Herodotus seems to feel no difficulty in accepting such stories, when he decisively refuses to believe that the Alcmaeonidae gave the shield signal at Marathon, even though he knows that the family had an old record of treacherous conduct (6.121–24); or that Thales divided the River Halys so that the Lydian army could pass (1.75); or that Cambyses promised his mother to take vengeance on the Egyptians because Cyrus was neglecting her for an Egyptian woman (3.3); or that Polycrates bribed the Spartans with counterfeit coins to give up the siege of Samos (3.56)?

A number of possible explanations suggest themselves. It is our modern habit, if a story has some details in it which seem incredible, to reject the story altogether; and we are not the more disposed to believe that "there must be something in it" because it is told in more than one version. The attitude of Herodotus is quite different. He does not believe that the Alcmaeonidae gave the

[67] See Rawlinson's note on 3.153.

[68] 5.35.

shield signal; but he is very certain that a shield *was* flashed, though by whom and with what exact purpose he cannot say.[69] He does not believe that the diver Scyllias swam under water all the way from Aphetae to Artemisium; but, instead of rejecting the tale that he was the man who brought the news of Persian losses in the storm, he states it as his opinion that Scyllias came by ship [70]—though there is no point in the story if a well known diver brings the news and comes by ship! He cannot believe that Rhampsinitus sent his daughter to a brothel; but the rest of the extraordinary tale seems to satisfy him well enough.[71] This attitude of his explains in some degree why he is willing to take what seem to him the most plausible elements in rival versions of a story and combine them into a consistent narrative, as he does in his account of the settlement of Cyrene, which is a combination of the versions of the Lacedaemonians, the Theraeans, and the Cyrenaeans.[72] This procedure has been popular with writers of fiction at all times, and critics call it by the name of *contaminatio;* but when historians make use of it themselves, they give it the more dignified name of "historical reconstruction."

Another conclusion is suggested by his use of a phrase which might be translated "it is neither reasonable nor consistent." He uses this phrase in his discussion of the shield signal at Marathon [73] and argues that the charge against the Alcmaeonidae is not consistent with their distinguished position in the Greek world and their well known opposition to tyranny. Such an act of medism, he thinks, would be entirely "out of character." This type of criticism, of course, can be practised only when the character of the person or persons concerned is already established and beyond dispute. For example, it was appropriate that Thales should accomplish strange and marvellous things by applying his scientific knowledge; Herodotus rejects the tale that he diverted the River Halys, not because it was a remarkable thing to do, but because the feat was pointless if it did not enable the Lydians to return as well

[69] 6.124: *ἀνεδέχθη μὲν γὰρ ἀσπίς, καὶ τοῦτο οὐκ ἔστι ἄλλως εἰπεῖν· ἐγένετο γάρ· ὃς μέντοι ἦν ὁ ἀναδέξας, οὐκ ἔχω προσωτέρω εἰπεῖν τούτων.*

[70] 8.8: *λέγεται μέν νυν καὶ ἄλλα ψεύδεσιν ἴκελα περὶ τοῦ ἀνδρὸς τούτου, τὰ δὲ μετεξέτερα ἀληθέα· περὶ μέντοι τούτου γνώμη μοι ἀποδεδέχθω πλοίῳ μιν ἀπικέσθαι ἐπὶ τὸ Ἀρτεμίσιον.*

[71] 2.121, ε.

[72] 4.150, 154.

[73] 6.124: *οὕτω οὐδὲ λόγος αἱρέει ἀναδεχθῆναι ἔκ γε ἂν τούτων ἀσπίδα ἐπὶ τοιούτῳ λόγῳ.* Cf. 3.45.3.

as to advance.[74] On the other hand, the stories about Themistocles are entirely in keeping with his character as a shrewd self-seeking politician. It is the same with the tale of Cambyses, who is assumed to be mad or at least unbalanced (*οὐ φρενηρής*) [75] from the beginning. The reports of his crimes are therefore accepted and his acts are represented as those of a madman; no account is taken of the fact that both the Egyptians and the supporters of Darius were bound to be severely prejudiced against him; there is no proof of his madness, when the question is raised, except the doubtful anecdotes themselves.[76]

In general, however, it is much harder for Herodotus to estimate the character of a barbarian, just as it is harder for him to pass judgment on the credibility of a barbarian story, since he does not altogether understand their literary or moral conventions. This point is shown most clearly in his analysis of the motives which underlie actions. He has often been adversely criticized for his readiness to believe that national policy has been determined by the personal jealousies and selfish fears of individuals.[77] Where Greeks are concerned, he has the epic traditions in such matters to guide him and he ought to be fully aware what he is doing when he accepts a version that recalls the psychology of the Homeric poems. It should be instructive, therefore, to compare his treatment of Greek and barbarian characters when a motive for action has to be established or suggested.

The prejudice of Herodotus against an autocratic form of rule, typical of an orthodox Greek democrat, is shown most clearly in the speech supposed to be delivered by Otanes when the seven Persian conspirators are discussing forms of government. Otanes maintains that not even the worthiest of men, when he becomes a monarch, can retain his original character, but that he is always swayed by jealousy and *hybris;* that he is led by these passions to do many horrible things; that he trusts no one, is completely unstable, and loses his sense of moral values, both in public and private life.[78] Herodotus illustrates all these characteristics of the auto-

[74] 1.75.

[75] 3.25, 30.

[76] 3.38: *πανταχῇ ὦν μοι δῆλά ἐστι ὅτι ἐμάνη μεγάλως ὁ Καμβύσης· οὐ γὰρ ἂν ἰροῖσί τε καὶ νομαίοισι ἐπεχείρησε καταγελᾶν.*

[77] Cf. e.g. W. Schmid, *Griech. Literaturgesch.* 1.2.605–06; J. Geffcken, *Griech. Literaturgesch.* 1.280.

[78] 3.80.

cratic ruler, not only in his accounts of barbarian kings, but also in his treatment of Greek tyrants. Thus we must expect to find that Periander and Polycrates, as well as Candaules and Cheops and Xerxes, are treated as cases of abnormal psychology. Even the madness of Cambyses shows itself in acts of outrageous jealousy, as when (according to the Egyptian account) he dismisses his brother Smerdis from Egypt because he is the only Persian who can draw the bow brought by the Ichthyophagi.[79] This is the kind of madness which Herodotus leads us to expect in a monarch.

Cyrus on one occasion orders his army to dig canals so as to distribute the waters of the River Gyndes over the countryside; one might think that this measure was designed to irrigate the land; but, according to Herodotus, he is carrying out his threat to humble the river and punish it for carrying off one of his white horses.[80] Likewise his attack upon the Massagetae is explained from motives of supreme conceit; his reasons, according to Herodotus, were, first, his belief that he was more than mortal, second, his unbroken series of successes which made it appear that he was invincible.[81] Again, no orthodox imperialistic reason is allowed for the attack of Cambyses on Egypt; though Herodotus offers three different versions, he clearly prefers the Persian account that the king was anxious to punish Amasis for a personal affront.[82] Darius, on the other hand, who is represented as superior to the usual autocrat, is supposed to invade Scythia with some degree of justice, since the Scythians in time gone by had attacked Media; and he has a similar excuse for his attack on Athens, since the Athenians had taken an active part in the Ionian revolt.[83] Xerxes, however, a monarch of supreme arrogance, is not supposed to be primarily interested in avenging the defeat of Marathon; the more important thing for him is to equal the exploits of his predecessors and win new power for the Persians; his glory, he hopes, will be in succeeding where his father failed, not merely in exacting just retribution from the enemies of his country.[84] After Xerxes has stated his intention

[79] 3.30.

[80] 1.189.

[81] 1.204.

[82] 3.1–3.

[83] 4.1; 5.105.

[84] 7.8α: *ἐγὼ δὲ ἐπείτε παρέλαβον τὸν θρόνον τοῦτον, ἐφρόντιζον ὅκως μὴ λείψομαι τῶν πρότερον γενομένων ἐν τιμῇ τῇδε μηδὲ ἐλάσσω προσκτήσομαι δύναμιν Πέρσῃσι· φροντίζων δὲ εὑρίσκω ἅμα μὲν κῦδος ἡμῖν προσγινόμενον χώρην τε τῆς νῦν ἐκτήμεθα οὐκ ἐλάσσονα οὐδὲ*

before the assembly of Persian notables, Mardonius confirms him in his design by skilful flattery, whereas Artabanus' contrary advice rouses the king's anger; Xerxes is thus shown as the typical tyrant, who must be fed with flattery and cannot endure opposition.[85]

It is not difficult to find further instances in which motive is made to fit a character, when a tyrant is involved. The Ionian tyrants guarding Darius' bridge over the Danube are persuaded not to destroy it by Histiaeus; not that he feels any loyalty towards Darius, but he warns them that, if their cities become independent from Persia, each one will want to drive out its tyrant and set up a democracy. Miltiades, on the other hand, who wants to destroy the bridge and is not swayed by this selfish argument, is no ordinary despot but a loyal citizen of Athens, who places the interests of his native city before his immediate advantage as tyrant of the Chersonese.[86] Aristagoras has the true tyrant's motive when he consents to help the exiles from Naxos recover their position in their country: he thinks that he will become ruler of the island.[87] Histiaeus, in his turn, sends the secret message urging Aristagoras to stir up a revolt against the Persians not because he thinks the rebellion will succeed, but in the hope that Darius will send him, the former ruler of Miletus, to restore order and will reinstate him in his tyranny.[88] Furthermore, the quarrels between rival kings of Sparta are always explained as resulting from personal jealousies rather than from differences of opinion over public policy.[89]

No claim is made that the foregoing discussion provides a complete treatment of the critical abilities of Herodotus. Other topics, besides those selected for discussion here, should be carefully investigated before any general conclusions can be stated with confidence. It is important, however, to emphasize once again

φλαυροτέρην παμφορωτέρην δέ, ἅμα δὲ τιμωρίην τε καὶ τίσιν γινομένην. Compare with these arguments the reasons given for Croesus' attack upon the Persians (1.73): ἐστρατεύετο δὲ ὁ Κροῖσος ἐπὶ τὴν Καππαδοκίην τῶνδε εἵνεκα, καὶ γῆς ἱμέρῳ προσκτήσασθαι πρὸς τὴν ἑωυτοῦ μοῖραν βουλόμενος, καὶ μάλιστα τῷ χρηστηρίῳ πίσυνος ἐὼν καὶ τείσασθαι θέλων ὑπὲρ Ἀστυάγεος Κῦρον. The third motive (desire for just revenge) is here mentioned for the first time and is explained in the chapters which follow. It is clearly not given as the most important reason for his attack on Cyrus. Cf. H. Bischoff, *Der Warner bei Herodot* (Diss. Marburg, 1932) 37.

[85] 7.9–11.

[86] 4.137.

[87] 5.30.

[88] 5.35.

[89] 6.61 (Demaratus and Cleomenes), 5.42 (Dorieus).

that the actual selection of topics must be made with care, since we can do justice to the historian's powers of criticism only when we are sure that he was free to make up his own mind, unaffected by his regard for the religious sensibilities of his readers and his own instinct for literary propriety. Criticism is on very uncertain ground as soon as it begins to assume that an ancient writer means one thing and says something else—that an expression of belief disguises an inner feeling of doubt. This article, therefore, has been confined to topics on which it seems certain that Herodotus meant what he said. Its conclusions may briefly be set forth as follows: Herodotus was, for various reasons, not always equally receptive towards reports of barbarian customs and the geography of strange lands; he was uncritical and unobservant where phenomena of natural history were concerned; but he was not, as a rule, ready to accept scandalous gossip, except when it confirmed a preconceived opinion about the character involved; and it was his habit to analyze the motives of men and women according to the estimate which he had previously formed of their character rather than by attempting to put himself in their position and to decide what his feelings would have been in a like situation.