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Herodotus and the Poets

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This is an attempt to describe Herodotus' relation to Greek poets, both as historical sources and as "cultural capital." It is a brief discussion (1500 words) written for a general audience; but it may be of interest as raising a matter not often considered outside of the excellent and long study by Ph.-E. Legrand in Vol. 1 of the Budé *Hérodote* (pp. 147 ff.).

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[Appendix to “The Landmark Herodotus,” ed. R. Strassler]

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In the centuries before Herodotus took up his “inquiry” (*historiē*) into the past, poets had provided the Greeks with stories about their origins and the great achievements of long ago. The earliest such poems preserved for us are by Homer and Hesiod, long epics that are dated to the late eighth or early seventh century; but Homer and Hesiod were clearly carrying on much older poetic traditions that reached back for centuries to the bronze age. As entertainers and as preservers of oral traditions, rather than critical and well equipped researchers, epic singers welcomed myths of all kinds into their stories, which they located in a long-lost heroic age, peopled by “godlike men, a race of demigods” (so Hesiod in his Works and Days 159-165). But epic singers were not completely fancy free: as memorizers of old stories and versifiers of good new ones, they functioned in a society without writing as an important repository of stories about the past, whether it be in Thebes or Troy; singers also knew that heroic traditions, what Homer calls “the fames (klea) of men of former times, the heroes” (Iliad 9.524-5), had always inspired ambitious spirits to attempt great things. Hence they would find much to agree with in Herodotus’ opening declaration that the purpose of history is “that what has happened may not be lost to men through the agency of time, and so the great and marvelous deeds of men, whether Greek or foreigner, may not become without fame (a-

klea)” (1.1). The development of history was undoubtedly a major intellectual advance of the fifth century, but Herodotus and his colleagues were also developing a form of storytelling as old as that word kleos, ancient source of the name Clio, the Muse of History, as well as of the English word “listen.”

When Herodotus follows up his statement of purpose by promising to disclose “on account of what cause they came to fight against each other,” this also suggests the way epic poets asked the Muse to tell them their stories from the beginning (see, e.g., the opening lines of the Iliad). Such affinities, along with Herodotus’s easy narrative style, fondness for speeches, and Ionic dialect, have led him to be regarded sometimes as writing a sort of prose epic of the Persian wars. But this would be an inadequate description of Herodotus’ complex relationship to Greek poetic traditions, in which he was deeply versed but which he also could appraise quite coolly.

An ancient report says that Herodotus was closely related to Panyasis, a fifth-century poet whose works include an epic on Heracles. This may be a fiction inspired by the fact that Panyasis came from the same home town, Halicarnassus. But it usefully points to Herodotus’ rich familiarity with Greek poetry. Doubtlessly well educated, Herodotus could hear poetry everywhere when he was growing up: Homer, Hesiod and many other epics were widely performed, and a good many short songs from the sixth and early fifth centuries (what scholars call “archaic lyric poetry”) were in the air. Apart from Homer and Hesiod, Herodotus exhibits knowledge of Athenian tragedy and of a number of lyrics by the likes of Sappho, Alcaeus, Solon, Arion, Simonides, and Pindar. He also quotes (some suspect composed) numerous oracles in verse as well as epigrams commemorating a person or place. His devotion to poetic culture is also evident in his

excurses into literary history: he looked into such difficult questions as the date of Homer and Hesiod (whom he places around 400 years before his own time, not a bad estimate at all) and when the cult song called the Dithyramb was invented. He knows something of the lives of such figures as the fable-composer Aesop or the love-poet Anacreon.

A number of Herodotus's poetic references serve no historical purpose but seem designed to show his broad and sophisticated culture, as when he quotes with approval some words of Pindar (the opening of a famous poem) on the power of convention (3.38). In a similar way, speakers in Herodotus can sometimes drop a poetic tag into an oration, as when an Athenian envoy to Syracuse pulls a line out of Homer in praise of Athens to convince Gelon of his city's greatness (8.161). Herodotus sometimes cites poets to help locate a historical figure in time, such as Archilochus' reference to Gyges (1.12, if genuine), Solon's to a contemporary tyrant (5.113) or Sappho's to a famous courtesan who left a display at Delphi (2.135).

Herodotus is far from naïve in citing these poets, who, he suggests on more than one occasion, were primarily concerned to please their audiences. It was already proverbial in his day that poets often lied, and as an inveterate collector of sources he knew that even eye-witnesses could be unreliable. This seems to be the reason why Herodotus does not go to the poets for information when other sources are available. He quotes the famous Simonides several times, but apparently did not seek out his long elegiac poem (which has only recently come to light) retelling the battle of Plataea. Again, he knows the work of the tragic poet Aeschylus in some detail (2.156), but does not refer explicitly to the *Persians*, Aeschylus' great meditation on the meaning on the Persian wars. So too he knows that the Athenian Phrynichus caused a sensation with his

historical drama on the fall of Miletus (6.21), but gives no evidence of having consulted it for the Ionian revolt.

In some cases, however, Herodotus interprets poetic texts closely. Especially when dealing with prehistory, he can subject the oldest writings he knows—the poetry of Homer and Hesiod—to acute scrutiny. Such passages show that Herodotus went beyond urbane skepticism toward poetry and developed a studious and reasonable method for getting information from old songs. The great example is his long speculative discussion of what actually happened at Troy (2.50-60). Here he has appeared to some readers as a bit of a fool for ending up believing a fantastic story he claims to have got out of Egypt—that Helen never went to Troy (the gods having duped Paris with a phantom), but was spirited away to a welcoming Egypt. To an enlightened fifth-century thinker, however, Homer’s story was really no better, and in dismantling this Herodotus shows extraordinary skill and resourcefulness as a reader. He can point to, and quote, the exact lines in the Iliad that prove the “Egyptian” account is earlier than Homer, and shows such a thorough knowledge of old poems that he anticipates modern Homerists in discerning that some of the epics ascribed to Homer or Hesiod could not have been composed by them (4.32). It was once common to contrast Herodotus as a poetic tale-teller with Thucydides as scientific historian. But both are careful in using poets as sources: like any informant, poets may be attended to on subjects they were in a position to know about, but one must bear in mind that, being poets, they did not feel bound to record historical truth.

Herodotus, then, was not only deeply interested in the Muses’ arts but, when necessary, a scrupulous and intelligent reader of poetry. His complex stance can be

summed up by returning to the opening of the Histories and noticing precisely where the story begins (1.2-6). Having promised to tell “what caused” the Greeks and Persians to fight, Herodotus begins by surveying a series of legends in which Eastern women were stolen by Greeks and vice versa. Phoenicians started everything, “they say,” when they kidnapped Io, a young woman from Argos in the Peloponnesus and ran off to Egypt. The story of Europa is then introduced as the Greek response, portraying her not on the back of a tauriform Zeus, but as a maid from Phoenician Tyre snatched away by Greeks. The story of Jason and Medea is told next, as the tale of a kidnapped princess from the Black Sea. Finally comes Paris, who carried the Greek beauty Helen off to Troy and so sparked the first war between East and West. Herodotus is noncommittal on the veracity of these traditions, many of which, despite being attributed to “learned Persians” and others, were surely circulating in Greek poems. As an ensemble, as a tit-for-tat series of narratives, their source is ultimately Herodotus’ talent for comparing traditions and arranging them in patterns, along with his pleasure in telling the tales he collected. But he was also a critical collector, and Herodotus breaks off this dip into the mythic past to ask who “actually” first attacked Greece. This he professes to be able to answer from his own knowledge: it was Croesus of Lydia (ca. 560-546 BCE). With this decidedly non-poetic figure, history has begun.