

Ancient Greek HISTORY

Overview The historical sense is less old than group memory, which we suppose coeval with the first organization of a society. Ancient Greek society opens to us in the Homeric epics, which though (especially the *Iliad*) they seem on the whole to be ‘historical’ are infused with imagination, creative design, and the interests of poetic technique. It would be hard to find other written work, between Homer and the fifth century, which was more narrowly ‘historical’ than Homer’s. The lyric poets, the Milesian philosophers, and above all the dramatists: all these writing groups processed the past, but as myth or imagination. It is first with Herodotus and Thucydides, in the fifth century B.C.E., that the genre of ‘history proper’ begins to be written in Greece. This genre, though inflected by interests of poetry, imagination, philosophy, is meant to memorialize (not simply archive) a swathe of the past of Athens (and other Greek colonies and city-states of the time.)

Herodotus (484-425 B.C.E.) Herodotus was the first Greek historian. In his *History* he recounted the events and pre-war build up of the Persian Wars, in which the Athenians, and some other city-states, discovered their identity and group pride by defeating an army and naval force much larger than their own. In the course of recounting this life and death struggle—which has many elements of drama and poetry in it—Herodotus stops often along the way, to tell us of the curious and unfamiliar customs of the regions—Egypt, Persia—through which his main narrative takes us. He thus becomes the anthropologist, too, a figure attractive to many historians to come.

Thucydides (460.B.C.E.-398 B.C.E.) Thucydides wrote his great work of history about the Peloponnesian Wars, that struggle that broke out, after the Persian Wars, between the *poleis* of Athens and Sparta, the two pillars of Hellenism against the Persian invasion. Taking off where Herodotus left off, Thucydides worked from a realistic, first-person inquiry sense of *Realpolitik*, from which, in a style that was always careful, dry and pithy, he created a work that contrasted sharply with the style of Herodotus. While Herodotus is out to celebrate the glorious achievements of Athens, and to do so in an often folksy and anecdotal fashion, Thucydides packs tense international relations into sharp dialogue and aphoristic commentary, cutting to the bone and taking care not to take sides.

Other historians Mention should be made of two later Greek historians. **Xenophon** (430-354 B.C.E.), a pupil of Socrates, is familiar to most students of the Greek language, who teethe on the *Anabasis* (370 B.C.E.), a thrilling account of the return of 10,000 Greek mercenaries—Xenophon was one of their generals—from Persia to Greece. As a practicing historian, Xenophon is known especially for his *History* of the declining Hellenism of the late fifth and early fourth centuries. **Polybius** (264-146 BC.E.), writing in another era, gives his attention to the early formative period of the Roman Republic, excelling in his accounts of events like the sack of Carthage by the Romans (146 B.C.E.). It marks Polybius’ work that he thinks in terms of admired models, like Philip of Macedon, from whom the reader can derive life-lessons.

Reading

Luce, T. James, *The Greek Historians*, London, 1997.

Parmeggiani, Giovanni, *Between Thucydides and Polybius, the Golden Age of Greek Historiography*, Cambridge (Mass.), 2014.

Discussion questions

What elements of Hellenic imaginative literature do you see in Herodotus? Has he anything in common with the view points of tragic (or comic) drama?

What is the difference between the attitude of Herodotus to Athens, and that of Thucydides? Do their attitudes differ because they wrote about different moments in Athens’ history?

Herodotus is called both ‘the father of history’ and ‘the father of lies.’ Which name do you think fits him better? Explain.

HERODOTUS

Herodotus The Father of History (490-425 B.C). Herodotus wrote the first significant history of Greece and of his travels both in Greece and in other parts of the Eastern Mediterranean. Is he the father of history or, as some ancient critics claimed, ‘the father of lies’? (Or, as more than one wit has queried, are history and lies the same?)

The historical imagination. By contemporary standards it might seem that epic, lyric, and drama clearly belong to the literary imagination, while questions could be raised about philosophy and history. I think that we can quell such doubts about ‘philosophy,’ by showing that it rose from an inquiry tradition seeking the central meaning of reality, and that right through Socrates and Plato Greek philosophy belonged to a restless inquiry distinctively targeting both the nature of physical reality and then, at its peak, the nature of ethical relationships, knowledge, and logic. Is not this kind of inquiry a close kin to the kind of ‘address to the world’ fundamental to epic, lyric, and drama, all of which propose, and observe, models of the world we live in? And is not history, at least in the Hellenic sense, just such an inquiry? The Greek verb *historeo*, *I inquire*, lies at the root of the word ‘historia,’ and while today, among scholars of history, there may be fierce debate about whether history is a science or simply a special kind of language, there is no doubt that for the Greeks of Herodotus’ time history was just one more offspring of the Muses. Clio, after all, was the Muse of History, and took her place beside her sisters, all of them wellheads of the arts.

What kind of history does Herodotus write? The underlying purpose of Herodotus’ work is to create a history of his time, with an end point at the Battles of Marathon (490 B.C.) and Salamis (480 B.C), that is at the point where the Greeks triumph over the vast Persian Empire. To achieve that historization of his own time Herodotus concentrates on the peripeties of the Persian monarchy from the time of Cyrus in the mid-sixth century to that of King Xerxes whose fleet the Greeks defeat at Salamis.

Digressions. In constructing his history Herodotus digresses constantly—he declares that digression is his plan—drawing on his own extensive travels in the Near East and Egypt, on travellers’ tales, and on earlier Greek world historians, like Hecataios. While his digressions are never pointless, and are almost always amusing, they contribute only indirectly to the construction of his overall history. It will be well to look at a sample of Herodotus’ historical thinking.

How Herodotus thinks as an historian. We need to consider the kind of mind work Herodotus carries out, in presenting a history. Take the story of Gyges and Candaules. (Book One, the beginning.) What does the telling of that story have to do with furthering Herodotus’ history timeline? Start with this. Herodotus wants to locate King Croesus of Lydia in terms of his own lineage. Why? To construct the true architecture of known time. And why Croesus? Because Croesus is the King who, by capturing and subduing Greek city states in Asia Minor, first generated conflict between the Greeks and their neighbors to the East. So how to present the line of descent that led from the first Lydian King, Candaules, ‘down to’ Croesus, more than a century later? The way Herodotus ‘chooses’—in fact the thought movement congenial to him throughout his history—is to start by dramatizing the events that led to the kingly transition from the first Lydian monarch, Candaules, to his successor, Gyges. We are talking, of course, about the ‘story’ of Gyges and Candaules. Herodotus moves the timeline through ‘episodes.’

What do you think about this kind of historicizing? The kind of story-writing history, which Herodotus loves, is one way of building a time line. In a sense the tale of Gyges and Candaules is a ‘date’ on a list of time periods. In every sense of the word ‘imagination’ Herodotus is one with the other ‘literary minds’ who create ancient Greek culture.

Reading

Primary Source Reading

Herodotus, The Histories, Revised, trans. Aubrey de Selincourt, 2003

OR

<http://mcadams.posc.mu.edu/txt/ah/Herodotus/Herodotus1.html>

Secondary Source Reading

Evans, J.A.S., *Herodotus, Explorer of the Past: Three Essays* (Princeton, 1991).

Further Reading

De Selincourt, A., *The World of Herodotus* (London, 1962).

Suggested Paper Topics

Herodotus sets out to trace the development of the Persian monarchy, from its origins in the mid-sixth century to its defeat under Xerxes at the hands of the Greeks. Are you able to follow this underlying history through the maze of tales and reports that make up the bulk of the history? Does it seem important, to Herodotus, that you should keep the fundamental timeline in mind?

Does Herodotus ever talk about himself? Or do you feel he reveals himself without talking about himself? How would he so reveal himself?

Text EXCERPT Book One Herodotus History <http://mcadams.posc.mu.edu/txt/ah/Herodotus/Herodotus1.html>

[1.0] THESE are the researches of Herodotus of Halicarnassus, which he publishes, in the hope of thereby preserving from decay the remembrance of what men have done, and of preventing the great and wonderful actions of the Greeks and the Barbarians from losing their due meed of glory; and withal to put on record what were their grounds of feuds.

[1.1] According to the Persians best informed in history, the Phoenicians began to quarrel. This people, who had formerly dwelt on the shores of the Erythraean Sea, having migrated to the Mediterranean and settled in the parts which they now inhabit, began at once, they say, to adventure on long voyages, freighting their vessels with the wares of Egypt and Assyria. They landed at many places on the coast, and among the rest at Argos, which was then preeminent above all the states included now under the common name of Hellas. Here they exposed their merchandise, and traded with the natives for five or six days; at the end of which time, when almost everything was sold, there came down to the beach a number of women, and among them the daughter of the king, who was, they say, agreeing in this with the Greeks, Io, the child of Inachus. The women were standing by the stern of the ship intent upon their purchases, when the Phoenicians, with a general shout, rushed upon them. The greater part made their escape, but some were seized and carried off. Io herself was among the captives. The Phoenicians put the women on board their vessel, and set sail for Egypt. Thus did Io pass into Egypt, according to the Persian story, which differs widely from the Phoenician: and thus commenced, according to their authors, the series of outrages.

[1.2] At a later period, certain Greeks, with whose name they are unacquainted, but who would probably be Cretans, made a landing at Tyre, on the Phoenician coast, and bore off the king's daughter, Europe. In this they only retaliated; but afterwards the Greeks, they say, were guilty of a second violence. They manned a ship of war, and sailed to Aea, a city of Colchis, on the river Phasis; from whence, after despatching the rest of the business on which they had come, they carried off Medea, the daughter of the king of the land. The monarch sent a herald into Greece to demand reparation of the wrong, and the restitution of his child; but the Greeks made answer that, having received no reparation of the wrong done them in the seizure of Io the Argive, they should give none in this instance.

[1.3] In the next generation afterwards, according to the same authorities, Alexander the son of Priam, bearing these events in mind, resolved to procure himself a wife out of Greece by violence, fully persuaded, that as the Greeks had not given satisfaction for their outrages, so neither would he be forced to make any for his. Accordingly he made prize of Helen; upon which the Greeks decided that, before resorting to other measures, they would send envoys to reclaim the princess and require reparation of the wrong. Their demands were met by a reference to the violence which had been offered to Medea, and they were asked with what face they could now require satisfaction, when they had formerly rejected all demands for either reparation or restitution addressed to them.

[1.4] Hitherto the injuries on either side had been mere acts of common violence; but in what followed the Persians consider that the Greeks were greatly to blame, since before any attack had been made on Europe, they led an army

into Asia. Now as for the carrying off of women, it is the deed, they say, of a rogue: but to make a stir about such as are carried off, argues a man a fool. Men of sense care nothing for such women, since it is plain that without their own consent they would never be forced away. The Asiatics, when the Greeks ran off with their women, never troubled themselves about the matter; but the Greeks, for the sake of a single Lacedaemonian girl, collected a vast armament, invaded Asia, and destroyed the kingdom of Priam. Henceforth they ever looked upon the Greeks as their open enemies. For Asia, with all the various tribes of barbarians that inhabit it, is regarded by the Persians as their own; but Europe and the Greek race they look on as distinct and separate.

[1.5] Such is the account which the Persians give of these matters. They trace to the attack upon Troy their ancient enmity towards the Greeks. The Phoenicians, however, as regards Io, vary from the Persian statements. They deny that they used any violence to remove her into Egypt; she herself, they say, having formed an intimacy with the captain, while his vessel lay at Argos, and perceiving herself to be with child, of her own free will accompanied the Phoenicians on their leaving the shore, to escape the shame of...

THUCYDIDES

Who was Thucydides? This observer of the grandeur and fall of the Athenians, during the second half of the fifth century, served as a general in the north of Greece, but apart from that evidence of his personal experience remains known almost solely for one book, his *History of the Peloponnesian War*. In that great work—some would say it, not Herodotus' *Histories*, was the first true History--Thucydides (middle fifth Century-399 B..C.) proved himself a drier, more analytical, more philosophical historian than his predecessor and on the whole admired model, Herodotus. Thucydides probes the causes and resolutions that created the Peloponnesian War—up to the year 411 B.C.-- in the last thirty years of the fifth century. He writes his history largely by means of constructed (remembered, reported) speeches, by a careful sifting of evidence—in conscious difference from Herodotus, who, as we have seen, was often considered the 'father of lies'—and by sticking closely to his topic, unlike Herodotus, who was the master of the digression which fitted into his plan. And Thucydides develops a narrative style, as well as a view of mankind, which makes him a true cross between the epic creator and a seasoned and relatively pessimistic judge of human affairs.

How does Thucydides establish a history? Thucydides creates his history out of defined vignettes in which events of the Peloponnesian war are cameoed, usually with little, or very spare, commentary from the author. (As a participant general in the army of Athens, Thucydides sticks to the detail of military affairs, and—in this like Herodotus, too—makes almost no reference to himself, with the exception of a famed reference, in the third person, to a certain Thucydides who 'fought in the north.')

The Melian debate. After the debacle of the Sicilian Expedition, in 415 B.C., the Athenians decided to add to their Aegean possessions, and proposed a takeover of the small island of Melos, which had so far maintained a neutral posture in the Peloponnesian War, despite historical ties to Sparta. It will be worth your while to examine Thucydides' account of the debate between the Athenian envoys to the Melians, and the leading Melians who are chosen to discuss the Athenian proposals. (By this time the Athenians and their island allies have already been ravaging the island of Melos; their debate proposal is strictly from power.) The dry reliance on force, which the Athenian representative displays, is 'brilliant':

Melian: 'But must we be your enemies? Would you not receive us as friends if we are neutral and remain at peace with you?'

Athenian: 'No, your enmity does not injure us as much as your friendship; for your enmity is in the eyes of our subjects a demonstration of our power, your friendship of our weakness.'

Never has *Machtpolitik* been so simply and clearly dissected. And so goes the description of the Melian episode, the interlocutors reduced to namelessness by Thucydides—not his usual practice—and the ruthless determination of the Athenians screwed tighter and tighter, but in the coldest possible language of diplomacy. It is no wonder that many 'modern historians' have turned back to Homer, for the model of the Thucydidean historian: as you will have seen, the *Iliad* is full of formally expressive delegations, carefully crafted hard-talk, and brutal resolutions. It hardly needs to be said that, at the end of the Melian debate, the Melian males were slaughtered and the women and children sold into slavery.

The Funeral Oration of Pericles. It being the custom in Athens that the elected leader of the Athenians should provide an oration for the military dead, each year, Pericles undertook this challenge after the end of the first year of the Peloponnesian War (431 B.C.). At that time Athens seemed manifestly in control of military affairs in Greece; the Long Walls were strong protection against invasion, trade was strong, culture was at its peak: men had been killed, of course, but it was time to frame those deaths fittingly. You will want to contrast the tone of Pericles—as Thucydides recreates it—with the tone of the Athenian representative at Melos; cold, logical, crushing. The mastery of such tone differences is the mark of Thucydides' brilliant inner ear for the sounds of history, and the true indicator of his allegiance to the tradition of epic narrative in Greece.

Reading

Thucydides, The History of the Peloponnesian War, ed. M. I. Finley, translated by Rex Warner (London, 1954). (Please read the whole text.)

Discussion

From the viewpoint of our focus, on types of imagination in Greek literature, the key question is: is Thucydides part of the epic or of the historical tradition? He memorializes, like a historian, but he does so (like Herodotus) in vignettes which are like 'scenes in a play,' often involving dialogue, and usually providing opposing sides of a given argument. His language is artful, strict, perceptive, hiding the person of its narrator but sensitive to the nuances of style that constitute character in language. An historian? An epic poet?

Are you happy with the analysis of Greek literature in terms of types of imagination? Do you see a genuine connection among the five types of imagination we isolated?

Aristotle commented that poetry is more philosophical than history, because poetry is concerned with what might have been rather than with what was. Was he right?

Despite the sharp differences, between the histories of Herodotus and Thucydides, do you think they converge in their use of short stories and vignettes to move the timeline along?