

already in the early twentieth century,²³ was originally dealt with by building on a small number of passages in which Herodotus defines some groups as *logioi*, obviously alluding in some way to their particular competence as informants. One of these passages comes right at the beginning of the *Histories* (1.1.1), where 'those of the Persians who are *logioi*' relate the sequence of abductions which they regarded as the origin of the hatred between Greeks and barbarians.²⁴ The assumption was that references to a group as saying something should be taken as a kind of shorthand for 'the *logioi* among the relevant people,' whom Herodotus supposedly sought out and consulted.²⁵

In a very general way, this theory cannot be wrong, for Herodotus doubtless looked for learned and knowledgeable informants, but taking collective *akoē* statements as shorthand for the interview of experts is a less than satisfactory solution, because the attribution of stories and various versions thereof to collective informants turns out to be highly artificial. Basically, this kind of *akoē* statement in Herodotus obeys two simple rules: first, that any human group is cited for events which happened or happen in their own country or, more rarely, happened to their ancestors elsewhere, and second, that a group, whether people or *polis*, will have a version of the past that puts the group itself in a good light.²⁶ The example of the foundation story of Cyrene, discussed above, shows both rules in action: it is the Spartans and Therans who speak about the foundation of Thera, and the Therans and Cyreneans who speak about the foundation of Cyrene. Where the latter two disagree, the Therans have a version that implies a non-traumatic separation of the would-be colonists of Cyrene from their metropolis, while the Cyreneans remember how their ancestors had great difficulties in founding their new city in an unknown land, and that the Therans had been distinctly unhelpful in that connection.²⁷ The second rule emerges most clearly when a conflict or controversy is narrated in two opposing versions, attributed to the two opposed parties, as in the case of the Athenian fiasco on the island of Aegina, which the Athenians attributed to divine intervention and the Aeginetans to themselves and their Argive allies (5.85–6).

On the whole, it seems reasonable to conclude that Herodotean references to collective informants are too good to be true, i.e., to be taken as a literal depiction of how Herodotus collected information. Otherwise we must believe that he never met, say, some very knowledgeable Milesian somewhere in the Aegean who had some interesting story to tell about Samos or Mytilene, or that he never took any story or piece of information from a written source – except for the story of the Pelasgians he attributes to Hecataeus (6.137.1–2). It should also be emphasised that *meta-historiē* in general and *akoē* in particular do not have a word for a category of informants that modern scholars increasingly recognise behind Herodotus'

stories, i.e., storytellers.²⁸ The consequence that should be drawn from these observations, however, is not that Herodotus forged his *akoē* statements to cheat his audience and feed it stories he had really concocted himself.²⁹ Such an interpretation would be anachronistic and misleading. But perhaps taking Herodotean *akoē* statements as source references is no less anachronistic. To be sure, it was almost inevitable that modern scholars should do so. Since the ancient historians have very often been seen as the founding heroes of historiography, attributing to the Father of History a practice typical of modern historiography is a very strong and almost subliminal temptation. Nonetheless, the temptation should be resisted, because the analogy between Herodotean *akoē* statements and modern historical source references is misleading in too many ways. Most conspicuously, the Herodotean narrator very often uses such statements to distance himself from a particular piece of information or from a story, not to lend it credibility by pointing to genuineness.³⁰ Indeed, in the case of the alleged treason of the Argives, quoted above (p. 79), he even suggests that such statements in general should be taken as disclaimers. Also relevant is the fact that the narrator apparently uses interchangeably *akoē* statements that would seem to us very different in quality, for instance, general references to collective informants and quite specific ones implying personal contact with a specific group of people (2.91.3–5; 4.14). This in turn calls our attention to the fact that after all it is not very clear why some stories or details are provided with an *akoē* statement while others are not.

In spite of the new and fruitful avenues of interpretation opened up by oral tradition research, taking *meta-historiē* literally, as if it were a realistic description of how the *Histories* came about, is problematic – witness the ongoing scholarly controversy on the trustworthiness of Herodotean *opsis* and the true extent of Herodotus' travels.³¹ But if *meta-historiē* is neither the giveaway of a grandiose literary forgery nor a straightforward depiction of Herodotus' historical method and an implicit autobiography of Herodotus of Halicarnassus, what can it be?

A map of knowledge

To answer this question, it may be helpful to dwell a little longer on the collective *akoē* statements, the so-called source references. They represent a reasonably well-defined group, and their meaning is not beyond explanation, especially once the notion is set aside that they refer in a realistic way to the process of gathering information. As pointed out above, the logic of the connection between the speakers and what they say is extremely clear. The collective *akoē* statements sketch a map of knowledge, based on the principle that the locals are the most competent informants about