

positively requires digressions (4.30). However, such digressions have to be justified (3.60.1).

In some cases, the Herodotean narrator defines the genre he is practising in an implicit and oblique fashion, pointing to ways of dealing with the past that are acceptable in other genres, but not in his. The best example is the discussion of the 'true' story of the abduction of Helen and of the Trojan War. Based on *gnōmē*, it is incredible that Priam and the Trojans might have chosen to be massacred by the Greeks rather than return Helen (2.120); if they did, it means that returning Helen was impossible and the Egyptian priests are right to say that she had been kept in Egypt by their king Proteus, and Menelaus had found her there after the war (2.113–19). Homer, according to Herodotus, had known the true story, but preferred the other one – that is, the *Iliad*! – because it was more appropriate for epic poetry (2.116). This, we are expected to understand, is the kind of liberty the author of the *Histories* would not claim for himself. The statement that Aeschylus had 'stolen' a story from the Egyptians (2.156.6) may have similar implications, pointing indirectly to the Herodotean narrator's practice of letting the audience know where his stories originate.⁴⁰

A number of statements regarding the gods, normally understood as expressing the narrator's stance in matters of religion, may also have implications for the definition of the genre of the *Histories*. Exclusively in Book 2, Herodotus repeatedly voices his unwillingness to deal with religion in depth. He would not report what the Egyptian priests told about the gods, except in so far as he is compelled to mention them by his *logos* (2.3.2). Explaining Egyptian rituals and the iconography of the gods is not something he is inclined to do (2.46.2, 47.2, 48.3); in general, he tries to avoid as far as possible talking about divine matters (2.65.1). While all such statements define an attitude to religion itself, they also separate *historiē* from other fields of knowledge and literary genres which dealt precisely with such topics.

These observations point to a central aspect of the problem of genre. Crucial to the definition of a genre is the drawing of borders towards other genres, all the more so when the subject matter does not of itself identify the genre. Herodotus' account of the Persian Wars and of their causes competed most directly with tragedy, elegiac poetry, and epic, and in some ways with encomiastic poetry, too. However, the problem was from the outset inherent in what is usually called early Greek historiography, which before Herodotus to a large extent had been mythography in prose, thereby dealing with the traditional subject matter of epic.⁴¹ In Greek culture, the past had been for centuries the province of poetry, especially but not only epic poetry, and the discourse of authority that traditionally applied to the past was based on privileged access to knowledge by virtue of what we might call a

charismatic predisposition, that is, direct inspiration from a superior entity, the Muse(s).⁴² Establishing a new way of dealing with the past implied the creation of a new kind of authority. The problem is already obvious in what is for us the very beginning of Greek historiography, the first sentence of Hecataeus' *Genealogies* (see n. 10 to this chapter). However, Hecataean *gnōmē* and the rationalist criticism of myth could only go so far, and were potentially problematic: once the stories had been purged of all implausible details, the problem of what authority vouched for the stories themselves was bound to come up.

Meta-historiē can be seen as a way to mark the differences towards other genres and carve out a niche for the *Histories*. To some extent, it avails itself of the discourse of authority developed by philosophy and the incipient natural sciences – hence the insistence upon *gnōmē* and *opsis*. More importantly, however, meta-historiē tackles headlong the problem of the provenance of the knowledge about the past and about foreign lands the author draws upon. Obviously, not all such knowledge could be validated by the critical scrutiny of *gnōmē* and *opsis*, yet on the other hand, excluding all that did not fall under that category meant the renunciation of the project altogether. Meta-historiē solves the problem by introducing multiple speakers to tell the several stories, and by generally bracketing the question of their truthfulness. By stressing that he is repeating things that are said already, independently of his retelling them or not, the Herodotean narrator in a sense hides his own activity and minimises it. The narrator may speak out for or against the truth of this or that story, but the stories exist of themselves and it is ultimately up to the reader to believe them or not. This tendency to put at the forefront the voices of other speakers comes to the fore with almost paradoxical clarity in the statement we have discussed earlier, where the narrator names his *opsis*, his *gnōmē* and his *historiē* as the entities that utter the text.⁴³

Both the *akoē* statements and source-references of later historians serve to legitimise the historian's narrative. The radical difference between the two pertains to the contexts in which this function is discharged. Before the emergence of historiography as a branch of knowledge and a literary genre, the set of techniques and assumptions that make it possible did not yet exist. The very concept of a 'source' is a product of this development, of which meta-historiē represents an early stage. Meta-historiē bears testimony to a cultural context in which a narrator cannot lend authority to his narrative by referring to the written works of a predecessor, as later Greek and Roman historians will do. Short of being able to assess a story based on consistency and autopsy, the Herodotean narrator can only step aside, letting the human groups whose past he relates take the stage and tell the story, in a way