

The strange way that *opsis*, *gnōmē* and *historiē* are presented as the subject of the action of uttering the text has captured less attention than it perhaps deserves;⁶ it will be necessary to return to this point later. For now, it should be observed that the relationship between *opsis*, *gnōmē* and *historiē* in the passage above is not completely straightforward. Apparently, *historiē* means here a process of inquiry quite separate from seeing and reasoning. Obviously autopsy and historical reasoning cannot be entirely divorced from the *apodexis historiēs* announced in the Herodotean proem.⁷ Yet *opsis* and *gnōmē* are never an end in themselves in the *Histories*, but appear to reinforce and complement the primary activity of research called *historiē*.

Opsis or lack thereof, the ultimate proof of truth, becomes especially relevant when things are described or mentioned that go beyond what can be counted upon as the audience's personal experience. Occasionally, however, it can also prove or disprove a plausible story collected by *akoē*.⁸ 'Some people' – presumably Egyptians, but Herodotus does not specify – say that, after Pharaoh Mycerinus raped his own daughter, her mother punished the maidens who had allowed this to happen by having their hands chopped off (2.131). To confirm the story, the handless statues of these maidens were pointed to, but Herodotus is not convinced:

As far as the above is concerned, these people talk nonsense, as it seems to me, especially as regards the statues: for in fact we ourselves have seen that the hands had fallen off through age, and they were still to be seen at the feet of the statues in my time.

Herodotus is here addressing a characteristic phenomenon of oral tradition, called iconatrophy, whereby a monument becomes the focus of stories that explain its features, with a rather loose connection to the real circumstances of its construction.⁹

Gnōmē applies to natural phenomena, as we see most famously in Herodotus' discussion of the Nile's floods (2.19–27), but it is also very often brought to bear on genuinely historical problems, as when Herodotus refuses to accept the story that the Alcmeonids had been prepared to betray Athens at the time of Marathon because he cannot see any plausible reason to explain such alleged treason (6.121–4). In general, Herodotus' reasoning is omnipresent in his narrative, and logical arguments, often deployed to rationalise and cut down to size mythic stories of the epic tradition, are the most powerful weapon of his hermeneutic arsenal – unsurprisingly, since, after all, early Greek historiography was born as a rationalising rewriting of myths based on the authors' marshalling arguments of plausibility.¹⁰ One of the most distinctive methods of Herodotean *gnōmē* is analogical reasoning, the use of conjecture about phenomena on which no direct evidence is

available – the course of the Nile, that Herodotus assumes to be similar to that of the Danube, provides the best example (2.33–4).¹¹

In striking contrast to *gnōmē* and *opsis*, Herodotean *akoē* does not necessarily guarantee the truth of the statement involved. On the contrary, Herodotus explicitly says a couple of times that his task is to report what is said, regardless of whether he believes it or not. One of these statements is found embedded in the discussion of Argos' behaviour at the time of Xerxes' invasion of Greece. Again, the wording is slightly puzzling (7.152.3):

As for myself, I am bound to tell what is told, but I am absolutely not bound to believe it, and let it be understood that this statement applies to every story I report. For it is also told that it was the Argives who called in the Persian against Greece, because their struggle with Sparta was not going well and they were ready to take anything instead of their present sorrow.¹²

The generalising tone of this statement should not divert attention from the fact that the narrator here is voicing his doubts about the credibility of the Argive complicity with the Persian invader. This was no doubt a highly contentious issue in Herodotus' own lifetime. Nevertheless, the narrator's insistence on this disclaimer as well as on its general applicability has to be taken seriously.

The cognitive instruments used by Herodotus, while setting him apart from later Greek historians, closely associate him with other thinkers involved in explaining the world and looking for the truth in a rational way. Traditionally, emphasis has fallen on the relationship with the methods and arguments of the early Presocratic philosophers of the late-sixth and early-fifth century, a relationship that is shown in the clearest way by a fragment of Heraclitus of Ephesus (VS 22 B 55), according to which Heraclitus' interest extended to all that falls into the range of *opsis*, *akoē*, and *mathēsis* (learning).¹³ The obvious resemblance to the Herodotean statement at 2.99 should not be taken, however, as a sign that Herodotus, who after all was active during the third quarter of the fifth century, was an old-fashioned fellow harking back to a previous cultural phase. Especially in the variety and complexity of logical arguments he uses, Herodotus is definitely a contemporary of his times, well aware of the developments in philosophy and rhetoric associated with the sophists, and abreast of the new turns taken in the investigation of nature, documented by Hippocratic medical treatises.¹⁴ An incipient contemporary discussion about nature and culture, or *physis* and *nomos*, is visible both in his cultural relativism and in his readiness to take on its own terms the coherence of patterns of behaviour different from those of the Greeks.¹⁵ However, Herodotus devoted himself largely to the investigation and recording of the past, a field markedly different in nature from those explored by