

themselves and their own land. This does not mean that they are not interested in their neighbours: when he reaches the borders of the world, the Herodotean narrator sometimes conveys a sense of distance by referring to the last people but one, as it were, as saying something about the very last (3.105; cf. 4.32), but these are the only exceptions to the rule. In other words, one of the functions of these statements is to define the limits of possible knowledge, both in space and in time – a topic the narrator is very interested in.³² They are based on the assumption that a community's memory will start at the community's birth and last as long as the community itself exists.³³

Besides that, the collective *akoē* statements simply reflect what may be expected to be the conventional interests and viewpoints of those who utter them. A very striking example is provided by the causes for the madness and untimely death of King Cleomenes of Sparta (6.75.3). According to the Athenians, this was a case of divine retribution because Cleomenes had plundered an Athenian sanctuary at Eleusis, while the Argives referred to a similar episode that had taken place at Argos and had involved also a treacherous massacre of Argive soldiers who had sought refuge in the sanctuary. According to the majority of the Greeks, however, Cleomenes' madness was a punishment for having corrupted the prophetess of Apollo in Delphi. As for the Spartans, they refused any supernatural explanation and preferred one that connected the fate of their king to alcoholism brought on by drinking wine not watered but neat, Scythian-style: a break of Spartan temperance (6.84) – an explanation that reinforced the normative value of the Spartan behavioural code. Clearly, locals are depicted as invoking local motives, while 'the majority of the Greeks' refer to a panhellenic transgression.

It is important to underline that the perfect overlap between collective *akoē* statements and local communities with their views and interests cannot have been any less obvious to an ancient audience than it is to a modern reader. This strongly suggests that Herodotus did not intend such statements to be taken as realistic depictions of the process he went through in gathering information, but as something different: recurring reminders of the nature of the knowledge assembled in the *Histories*. With the terminology of modern anthropology, the collective *akoē* statements can be seen as references to the social surface of such knowledge, that is, to the several groups that consider each single story or piece of information to be true and significant.³⁴ More appropriately, these statements form a part of the Herodotean narrator's attempt to explain his work to his audience in an understandable way, playing on their latent perception of knowledge about the past and about uses and customs as a shared possession of the community. This, incidentally, may help explain why there are no references to other early historians as

sources in the *Histories*: for a late-fifth-century audience, a written text did not yet carry an intrinsic authority that would have made it more valuable than what a given community thought of its past.³⁵ In the only case in the *Histories* where another historian is quoted (6.137), the reason is probably that the group whose viewpoint would have had to be called upon did not exist any more.³⁶

Author and authority

Reflecting about audience expectations seems a fruitful way of advancing our understanding of meta-historiē. This brings us back to the problem of genre. If we adopt a rather loose and pragmatic definition of genre as a set of historically and culturally specific expectations with which an audience approaches a text, it may be profitable to regard meta-historiē as an attempt at meeting and at the same time shaping those expectations, at activating notions of genre already existing in the cultural context while self-consciously creating a new genre.

The need to articulate the rules of a new genre and communicate them to the audience are the most satisfactory explanation for some extremely peculiar statements of meta-historiē, in which the narrator tells the audience what he is or is not supposed to do – as if inviting them to take part in a game whose rules they do not yet know exactly, while at the same time showing himself bound by those rules. For instance, after reporting some rather imaginative stories told by the Egyptians about the Pharaoh Rhampsinitus, Herodotus comments (2.123.1):

Let whoever considers trustworthy stories like these take for good the things told by the Egyptians. As for myself, my task in the whole *logos* is to write down³⁷ what everybody says, as I hear it (*akoēi*).

This attitude is voiced explicitly elsewhere in the *Histories*. A story qualified as less credible 'has to be reported, too, since it is told' (3.9.2). As we saw above, the Herodotean narrator is expected to report what is said, but he is not expected to believe it (7.152.3). He is not bound to mention the names of all the Persian fleet commanders at Salamis (7.99.1). On the other hand, when a *gnōmē* seems right to him, he is compelled to tell it, regardless of whether his audience will like it or not (7.139.1). As Deborah Boedeker aptly put it, 'Herodotus is free but not entirely free': the rules of his *logos* are above him.³⁸ They also dictate the rhythm of the text, as it were, pushing the narrator forward towards the next stage of a story, or back to a topic he had started addressing (e.g. 5.62: 'but on top of this, I must come back to the story I intended to tell . . .').³⁹ In general, his *logos* not only admits but