

contemporary Hippocratic writers, natural philosophers and rhetoricians, and *gnōmē* and *opsis* can account only for a limited part of the impressive display of information comprised in the *Histories*. It is in the realm of oral inquiry that the true secrets of Herodotus' workshop have to lie.

Herodotus as oral historian

Statements that fall into the broad range of *akoē* have been foremost in capturing the attention of scholars interested in Herodotus' historical methods and ultimately in the reliability of his stories.¹⁶ With their deceptive similarity to modern practice, statements of *akoē* have conjured up the image of Herodotus collecting information, carefully comparing different versions, assessing the trustworthiness of his informants, and keeping track of the process and inscribing it into his final text for all to see. The story of the foundation of the Greek colony of Cyrene in North Africa seems to provide a particularly good example of such a way of operating. It begins with a narrative of how Thera, Cyrene's mother-city, had been colonised by the Spartans – a story told by Spartans and Therans in agreement with each other (3.150.1). Then the circumstances are recounted that induced the Therans to plan a colonial expedition to Cyrene and the actual foundation of the city, according to the Therans (3.154.1: 'This is what the Therans say'). However, Herodotus adds, the people from Cyrene, while agreeing to some extent with this story, had something different to say about their founder, the Theran Battus, and added that the Therans had compelled the original colonists, fellow-citizens of theirs, to sail away, repelling them with stones when they tried to return to Thera.

The image of Herodotus the oral historian remained a rather sketchy one as long as scholars had to use only the narrator's own statements and a few passages from other fifth-century authors to give it substance. A turning point finally seemed to be reached once some scholars started adopting a comparative approach, looking for parallels into empirical research in living oral traditions, which represents one of the most distinct developments in the study of history in the second half of the twentieth century.¹⁷ Rather accidentally, what ended up being a template for students of Herodotus was not, e.g., oral history as practised by left-wing scholars in Western Europe and America, but rather the research on the transmission of knowledge by word of mouth that had been carried out by historians of pre-colonial Africa.¹⁸ In the decades after World War II, in a political climate dominated by the search for a new political identity in many new-born African states, a group of scholars, and especially the Belgian historian Jan Vansina, had started looking for hermeneutic instruments that could break through the chronological

boundary represented by the written records of the colonial powers and reach back into an African past.¹⁹ Vansina was a medievalist by training, with a strong philological background. He was familiar with the essentially Romantic idea that complex texts could be transmitted in a faithful way by word of mouth, but he was also sceptical. His solution to the problem of how to create a history of pre-colonial Africa was to work out a methodology to evaluate orally transmitted information and turn it into the foundation of a historical narrative that could satisfy the standards of twentieth-century professional historians. In so doing, he developed a typology and phenomenology of oral traditions that he intended to be generally applicable to other cultural contexts,²⁰ which made it all the more attractive for ancient historians to use his method to investigate oral tradition in Greece.²¹

Although the original reason for thinking of Herodotus as a historian working from oral tradition was the meta-history embedded in the text, the real strength of this new direction of research has been the ability to show that Vansina's principles on transmission and function of the oral tradition could be applied to narratives on archaic Greek history in the *Histories*, providing a number of insights into the origins and meaning of such narratives.²² This seemed to confirm that the knowledge about the past and about foreign lands and customs that forms the substance of Herodotus' *Histories* is best understood as originating from oral communication and transmission. In this process, it should be noted, Herodotean meta-history with its insistence on the oral nature of the inquiry allowed scholars to bracket the question of Herodotus' use of written sources and more generally to bypass the hotly debated problem of the relative importance of oral tradition and written texts in fifth-century Greek culture.

One thing has become clearer since Herodotean scholars first turned to oral tradition research: the comparative evidence provided by African oral tradition, while extremely relevant to the problem of the ultimate nature and provenance of Herodotus' stories, was not, however, helpful in advancing an understanding of Herodotus' own methods, that is, of answering the question of how precisely he had gathered oral traditions. Vansina's method presupposed direct access to knowledge about the past in its social context by way of fieldwork, that is, by way of interaction between the carriers of oral traditions and the historian, who was supposed to use rigorous methods to collect testimonies without contaminating them. From this point of view, the risk of anachronism in reconstructing Herodotus' own activity was high. It was still necessary to take meta-history literally, as a truthful description of Herodotus at work.

However, the narrator's references to collective informants could not possibly be taken in a strictly literal way. This problem, which had been recognised