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Meta-*historiē*: Method and genre in the *Histories*

I, Herodotus

In general, ancient historiography consists of extended narratives in the third person, with the author only rarely intruding in the first person. Herodotus' *Histories*, at the very dawn of ancient historiography, represent a conspicuous exception. The presence of Herodotus the narrator¹ in his text is stressed almost continuously by the occurrence of statements in the first person. They range from the rather nondescript kind, such as 'Those of the barbarians who returned [from a raid against Delphi] said – as I have been told – that they had seen other divine signs besides these' (8.38), or 'I cannot write down exactly which of the Ionians were cowardly or brave in that naval battle' (6.14.1), to extremely specific ones, such as 'This is what I heard from the priests in Thebes' (2.55.1). At times, the Herodotean narrator intrudes in his text to express a judgement, and more often to formulate an opinion. Most of the time, however, he raises his voice, as in the examples above, to refer to the process of gathering information, with its successes and failures.

Especially to readers accustomed to modern historiography, it does not seem strange that a historian should spend time talking about his activity as a researcher. After all, one of the first things a history student is trained to do is precisely to buttress his or her every statement, in so far as it goes above absolute banality, with a reference, usually telling where the corresponding information comes from. However, seen against the background of common practice in ancient historiography, Herodotus' presence in his text is highly peculiar. Other ancient historians rarely dealt with the question of how they gathered information, usually confining it to preliminary statements at the beginning of their works. They more commonly used the first person to pass judgement, especially in moral terms, as Polybius liked doing, or they disappeared completely from their texts, as Thucydides did most of the time. There is no real parallel among the Greek and Roman

historians for the enormous frequency of statements about the process of finding and assessing information that is typical of the *Histories*.² It seems that the characteristics of the Herodotean narrator should not simply be taken for granted.

Or should they? After all, authorial statements in Herodotus are rather straightforward, their meaning is not ambiguous, and on the whole they seem to lend themselves to a satisfactory interpretation. Why not take them at face value and use them as evidence for Herodotus' methods as a researcher?³ That is the question that will be explored here.

Herodotean footnotes

First-person statements are not the only passages that refer to the narrator's activity as a researcher. To come clean as to the provenance of the stories assembled in the *Histories* seems to be a paramount concern of the Herodotean narrator.⁴ Besides occasionally specifying the person by whom he himself was told something, he refers very often to other speakers, rarely individuals, usually groups, as vouching for portions of the text that may vary in length from a single piece of information to a whole story. Such references usually take the form of statements like 'the Spartans/Athenians/Egyptians say'. Taken together, first-person statements on the process of collecting and assessing information and 'they say' references form a sort of meta-discourse, running parallel to the narrative surface of the *Histories* and commenting on its nature and origin. Since Herodotus in his proem calls the activity he is engaging in *historiē*,⁵ the statements about such activity could be called meta-*historiē*; they form the core of modern reconstructions of Herodotus' historical method.

This method has three cornerstones, different in nature and relevance: first and most important, oral information, called by Herodotus *akoē*; second, his personal eyewitness testimony, called *opsis*, more powerful than *akoē* but subject to obvious restrictions, especially when talking about the past; third, Herodotus' own reasoning, called *gnōmē*. The three come together in a famous passage in Book 2, at the point where Herodotus moves from a more or less synchronic presentation of Egypt and Egyptian culture to the narrative of Egyptian history from the earliest times (2.99.1):

Up to this point, it is my own autopsy (*opsis*), judgement (*gnōmē*), and inquiry (*historiē*) that have spoken these things. Henceforth I will go on recording Egyptian stories as I have heard them; they will be supplemented by a certain amount of my autopsy.