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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.

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 iconatrophie, 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

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 Thera 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-historiē 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-historiē 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-historiē 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

already in the early twentieth century,²³ was originally dealt with by building on a small number of passages in which Herodotus defines some groups as *logioi*, obviously alluding in some way to their particular competence as informants. One of these passages comes right at the beginning of the *Histories* (1.1.1), where 'those of the Persians who are *logioi*' relate the sequence of abductions which they regarded as the origin of the hatred between Greeks and barbarians.²⁴ The assumption was that references to a group as saying something should be taken as a kind of shorthand for 'the *logioi* among the relevant people,' whom Herodotus supposedly sought out and consulted.²⁵

In a very general way, this theory cannot be wrong, for Herodotus doubtless looked for learned and knowledgeable informants, but taking collective *akoē* statements as shorthand for the interview of experts is a less than satisfactory solution, because the attribution of stories and various versions thereof to collective informants turns out to be highly artificial. Basically, this kind of *akoē* statement in Herodotus obeys two simple rules: first, that any human group is cited for events which happened or happen in their own country or, more rarely, happened to their ancestors elsewhere, and second, that a group, whether people or *polis*, will have a version of the past that puts the group itself in a good light.²⁶ The example of the foundation story of Cyrene, discussed above, shows both rules in action: it is the Spartans and Therans who speak about the foundation of Thera, and the Therans and Cyreneans who speak about the foundation of Cyrene. Where the latter two disagree, the Therans have a version that implies a non-traumatic separation of the would-be colonists of Cyrene from their metropolis, while the Cyreneans remember how their ancestors had great difficulties in founding their new city in an unknown land, and that the Therans had been distinctly unhelpful in that connection.²⁷ The second rule emerges most clearly when a conflict or controversy is narrated in two opposing versions, attributed to the two opposed parties, as in the case of the Athenian fiasco on the island of Aegina, which the Athenians attributed to divine intervention and the Aeginetans to themselves and their Argive allies (5.85–6).

On the whole, it seems reasonable to conclude that Herodotean references to collective informants are too good to be true, i.e., to be taken as a literal depiction of how Herodotus collected information. Otherwise we must believe that he never met, say, some very knowledgeable Milesian somewhere in the Aegean who had some interesting story to tell about Samos or Mytilene, or that he never took any story or piece of information from a written source – except for the story of the Pelasgians he attributes to Hecataeus (6.137.1–2). It should also be emphasised that *meta-historiē* in general and *akoē* in particular do not have a word for a category of informants that modern scholars increasingly recognise behind Herodotus'

stories, i.e., storytellers.²⁸ The consequence that should be drawn from these observations, however, is not that Herodotus forged his *akoē* statements to cheat his audience and feed it stories he had really concocted himself.²⁹ Such an interpretation would be anachronistic and misleading. But perhaps taking Herodotean *akoē* statements as source references is no less anachronistic. To be sure, it was almost inevitable that modern scholars should do so. Since the ancient historians have very often been seen as the founding heroes of historiography, attributing to the Father of History a practice typical of modern historiography is a very strong and almost subliminal temptation. Nonetheless, the temptation should be resisted, because the analogy between Herodotean *akoē* statements and modern historical source references is misleading in too many ways. Most conspicuously, the Herodotean narrator very often uses such statements to distance himself from a particular piece of information or from a story, not to lend it credibility by pointing to genuineness.³⁰ Indeed, in the case of the alleged treason of the Argives, quoted above (p. 79), he even suggests that such statements in general should be taken as disclaimers. Also relevant is the fact that the narrator apparently uses interchangeably *akoē* statements that would seem to us very different in quality, for instance, general references to collective informants and quite specific ones implying personal contact with a specific group of people (2.91.3–5; 4.14). This in turn calls our attention to the fact that after all it is not very clear why some stories or details are provided with an *akoē* statement while others are not.

In spite of the new and fruitful avenues of interpretation opened up by oral tradition research, taking *meta-historiē* literally, as if it were a realistic description of how the *Histories* came about, is problematic – witness the ongoing scholarly controversy on the trustworthiness of Herodotean *opsis* and the true extent of Herodotus' travels.³¹ But if *meta-historiē* is neither the giveaway of a grandiose literary forgery nor a straightforward depiction of Herodotus' historical method and an implicit autobiography of Herodotus of Halicarnassus, what can it be?

A map of knowledge

To answer this question, it may be helpful to dwell a little longer on the collective *akoē* statements, the so-called source references. They represent a reasonably well-defined group, and their meaning is not beyond explanation, especially once the notion is set aside that they refer in a realistic way to the process of gathering information. As pointed out above, the logic of the connection between the speakers and what they say is extremely clear. The collective *akoē* statements sketch a map of knowledge, based on the principle that the locals are the most competent informants about

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

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

that is most likely intended to mirror the audience's perception of its own knowledge of its past.

The approach sketched above has implications for the vexed question of the problematic status of the *Histories* between history and literature. Contemporary professional historians are often unwilling to see historiography as a genre. Writing in a genre means saying certain things because the norms of the genre require so, whereas pre-postmodern historians like to think that by and large the only laws that govern their writing are the old ones of Cicero, 'not to say anything untrue and not to leave out anything true' (*de orat.* 2.62). The notion of an implied author in a modern work of history is bound to create uneasiness, yet its appropriateness cannot be seriously denied. The same ambiguous relationship between genre and method applies to ancient historians. The texts of the ancient historians are not straightforward reflections of extra-textual 'true facts', but complex cultural artefacts, whose correct interpretation requires an understanding of their social logic.⁴⁴

Understanding meta-historiē is not the same as adjudicating the question of Herodotus' reliability. The claim that meta-historiē is more a literary strategy than a genuine depiction of the historian at work should not be taken to imply that Herodotus, the real author of the *Histories*, was not interested in a truthful reconstruction of the past. The amount of external confirmation that is available for countless pieces of information contained in the *Histories* should of itself show that indeed he was. However, fifth-century Greek culture had its own ideas on the nature and proper textual form of truth. Herodotean meta-historiē is shaped by such ideas, while at the same time attempting itself to shape them.

FURTHER READING

For detailed discussions of Herodotus' historical methods see especially Darbo-Peschanski (1987) and Lateiner (1989). Lloyd's commentary on Book 2 is also helpful. Jacoby's works (1913, 1949) are still worth reading, not only for their influence on later scholarship. Murray (2001a) remains the best study of Herodotus in the light of research on oral tradition; see also his retrospective comments, Murray (2001b). For an illuminating case-study see Forsdyke (1999). Research on oral tradition and the diffusion of knowledge about the past in societies ancient and modern have gone a long way after Vansina; see especially Fentress and Wickham (1992) and Assmann (1992), and the essays collected in von Ungern-Sternberg and Reinau (1988). On the circulation of information in Greek society see Lewis (1996). Herodotus' use of written sources is a matter for controversy, because of his own silence

on this point and general lack of parallel evidence. Parallels in Book 2 with fragments of Hecataeus have long since convinced most scholars that he did indeed use written sources of different kinds, but the extent of such usage is hard to assess. Fowler (2001) gives a sense of the amount of evidence that would have been available to Herodotus. Recent works by Giangiulio (2001 and forthcoming) show by way of sophisticated case-studies how we can imagine Herodotus weaving together a plurality of written and oral sources, generally undisclosed. Calame (1986) offers a rigorous framework to investigate Herodotus' presence in his text. Finding the bugs in the extremely subtle arguments of Fehling (1989) is a very instructive exercise.

NOTES

1. Throughout this chapter, 'the narrator' or 'the Herodotean narrator' refers to the textual *persona* of the author of the *Histories*. On Herodotus' authorial *persona* see especially Dewald (1987), (2002) with further references in n. 13.
2. Fowler (1996) 76; Marincola (1997) 10.
3. The disposition to read Herodotus for what he says, instead of interpreting his work in the light of categories derived from a scrutiny of ancient historiography as a genre, has often marked the dividing line between historians and philologists – a dividing line across which communication has not always been easy. As is always the case, lack of communication has damaged both sides.
4. Marincola (1997) 8.
5. On the meaning of this word see Fowler's contribution to this volume.
6. It is noteworthy that most translations cancel this oddity with renderings such as 'up to this point I have spoken based on, etc'. See Schepens (1975) 260–1.
7. The meaning of this announcement is explained by Bakker (2002) 20–8. See the discussion of 2.99.1 by Lloyd (1975–88) 1.81–2.
8. On *opsis* and its limits see Darbo-Peschanski (1987) 84–90; on its use to confirm odd pieces of information, Dewald (2002) 278–9.
9. The term 'iconatrophie' was coined by Jan Vansina; see Vansina (1985) 10. See pp. 80–82 for the relationship of Herodotean method and oral tradition.
10. Herodotean *gnōmē* is a key topic of Darbo-Peschanski (1987). The fact that for Herodotus *gnōmē* carries more weight than *akoē* is highlighted in Luraghi (2001b) 142–3. The superiority of the historian's reasoning over tradition comes strikingly to the fore in the first line of Hecataeus' *Genealogies*, *FGrHist* 1 F 1a: 'Hecataeus the Milesian says thus: I write what follows according to what I think is the truth, for the stories of the Greeks are many and ridiculous, in my opinion.' On Hecataeus' rationalism see Corcella (1984) 48–54 and Bertelli (2001).
11. On analogy in Herodotus see Corcella (1984) and Thomas (2000) 200–11, who shows connections between Herodotus' reasoning and contemporary trends in philosophy and medicine.
12. The other passage is 2.123.1, on which see below. Compare also 3.9.2: after giving what seems to him the most credible version of how Cambyses was able to cross the Arabian desert with his army, Herodotus adds a second version, that

he considers less credible, because, after all, 'it is told'. On these passages see Lateiner (1989) 79.

13. See the contributions of Fowler and Thomas in this volume.
14. On Herodotus' intellectual affinities see especially Thomas (2000) and in this volume, and in brief Raaflaub (2002a) 155–64.
15. For an exploration of Herodotus' attitude to cultural difference see Munson (2001a), correcting the excessive rigidity of the classic Hartog (1991).
16. Compare Jacoby (1913) 395.46–50: among the sources of Herodotus' knowledge, *opsis* and *gnōmē* need no further explanation.
17. This development is outlined in Luraghi (2001a).
18. On the politics of oral history and oral tradition research see Prins (2001) 120–6, 138–9.
19. For the development of the history of pre-colonial Africa and especially for the origins of Vansina's methods and concerns see Vansina (1994).
20. See especially Vansina (1985), although ancient historians have been more influenced by Vansina (1961) – note the subtitle: *Essai de méthode historique*. On the difference between the two see Murray (2001b) 321.
21. Studies of oral tradition in Greece inspired more or less directly by Vansina's works include Murray (2001a), Flower (1991), Thomas (1989), Evans (1991), Raaflaub (1988), Cobet (1988).
22. Murray (2001a).
23. Jacoby (1913) 412.
24. The meanings of the Greek word *logios* range from 'important, illustrious', with implications of social prestige, to 'learned, competent'. On its meaning in Herodotus see Vannicelli (2001) 214–15 and Luraghi (2001b) 156–9, with references to the relevant passages.
25. Jacoby (1949) 215–16, followed by Murray (2001a) 26–7; cf. also 40. For different versions of the *logioi*-theory see Nagy (1987), revised in Nagy (1990) 221–7 and Evans (1991). Criticism thereof in Luraghi (2001b).
26. See Fehling (1989) 87–108 and Darbo-Peschanski (1987) 91–4.
27. For an illuminating discussion of Herodotus' narratives on the foundation of Cyrene, highlighting the impossibility of taking Herodotean *akoē* statements at face value, see Giangulio (2001).
28. See Griffiths in this volume.
29. This interpretation, first put forward by Plutarch in his pamphlet against Herodotus (*de Her. mal.* 40), has been argued extensively in recent years by Detlev Fehling: see Fehling (1989). For an excellent discussion of Fehling's approach see Fowler (1996) 80–5.
30. See Shrimpton (1997) 245–6 and the discussion in Hornblower (2002) 374–80.
31. The main actors and their works are discussed in Luraghi (1994b).
32. On Herodotus' ideas about the limits of possible knowledge of the past see Darbo-Peschanski (1987) 25–38 and Vannicelli (1993).
33. Note Darbo-Peschanski (1987) 93–4: distance in time does not seem to affect local memory as depicted by Herodotus.
34. For the notion of social surface see Moniot (1970) 134–5.
35. This notion would also help make sense of Herodotus' peculiar attitude to written documentary evidence, whose existence is acknowledged without it being used

as a source for specific statements; see the perceptive observations of Darbo-Peschanski (1987) 95–6, and West (1985) on inscriptions.

36. Luraghi (2001b) 159–60.
37. Interestingly, the Herodotean narrator refers a number of times to his activity with the verb *graphō*, 'to write'; see Rösler (2002) 88–90.
38. Boedeker (2000) 109; Boedeker's excellent discussion of the genre of the *Histories* forms the starting point for the considerations that follow.
39. See Boedeker (2000) 108–11, Dewald (2002) 274–5 and Brock (2003).
40. See Darbo-Peschanski (1987) 99–100.
41. See Fowler's edition of the early mythographers and his forthcoming commentary (*EGM*).
42. Calame (1986) explores thoroughly the problem of the construction of authority in Greek literature, from the archaic age to Herodotus. See also two recent and excellent articles, Scodel (1998) and (2001).
43. See Dewald (2002).
44. See Spiegel (1997), especially 3–28.