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0521662591 - Herodotus in Context: Ethnography, Science and the Art of Persuasion -
Rosalind Thomas

Excerpt

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1 Introduction

Herodotus' *Histories* present his readers with a bewildering array of subjects, a total history and description of the known world. The narrative traces the relations between Greeks and barbarians from mythical times and the sixth-century Lydian conquest of the Asian Greeks, to their culmination, the Persian invasions of Greece in the early fifth century by the Great King. Within and alongside this narrative are digressions which describe almost the entire known world. As areas come under Persian attack – Lydia, Egypt, Libya, for example – their geography, customs and sometimes their history, are described, often at immense length. Herodotus shifts from being geographer, to historian to anthropologist. He moves effortlessly from describing the nature of the Scythian land mass to the customs of the various peoples within it. The furthest reaches of the world find a place – North Africa beyond the Straits of Gibraltar, India and the central Asian Steppes. He was, and still is, considered the father of history. But improbable tales also abound – Cicero calls them *fabulae* – and from antiquity he has been accused of lying. There is a mixture of credulity and wonder alongside an apparently careful measuring of evidence. He has also been claimed as the first anthropologist. In other words, as is well recognized, the *Histories* in all their breadth seem to spring up with little in the way of antecedents. As Momigliano put it famously, 'There was no Herodotus before Herodotus'.¹ Neither the Homeric epics nor Hecataeus' dry works on geography and genealogy at the turn of the sixth and fifth centuries² are quite enough to 'explain' the achievement of the *Histories*.

Herodotus must have been pursuing his research in the decades of the highest pinnacles of Athenian power (450s to 420s) and in a period when that power was justified by Athenians through their contribution to the Persian defeat, but he ceases his narrative strictly at the end of the Persian

¹ Momigliano (1966) 129; Cicero *De Legibus* 1.5.

² As with most fragmentary writers he is probably attributed with far more than he can reasonably bear, and the Hecataean remnants are especially austere: see n. 68 below.

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2 Introduction

Wars, on the very verge of the creation of the Delian League by Athens in 478 BC. The *Histories* have always been an essential source for archaic Greek history (pre-470s) and the Persian Wars themselves, and in that sense Herodotus seems a writer of the past, immersed in events long before his own time. Yet he is also a figure of the mid to late fifth century. He was travelling within the massive boundaries of the Persian empire, and writing (down to the 420s) at a time of important intellectual developments in 'science', natural philosophy and the art of argument. The mixture of the traditional and the modern in the *Histories* is often remarked. This book attempts to examine the *Histories* as part of the intellectual developments of the mid and late fifth century. It attempts to ask how far Herodotus' work should be seen as part of those developments – developments both in understanding the physical world, natural philosophy and medicine, and in the means of persuasion – rather than to an earlier and more traditional world to which his use of oral traditions links his narrative so closely. And it tries also to analyse them more explicitly as part of the world of East Greece, the Greek cities of the Eastern Aegean crouched on the edge of the Persian empire, between the Persian spheres of influence and the Athenian.

One example illustrates the contemporary late fifth-century angle that can sometimes be found in Herodotus' descriptions of ethnography. Egyptian religious practices fascinated Herodotus. In the midst of his description of their religious habits and in particular their cleanliness, Herodotus mentions certain Egyptian taboos surrounding behaviour in temples. 'Almost all other people, except for the Egyptians and the Greeks, couple in temples and enter such places after coupling without having washed, believing that human beings are just like the other beasts.' All other beasts and birds behave in this way inside temples, for, 'If this were not pleasing to the divinity, then animals would not do this either.' However, Herodotus concludes, 'I do not agree with those who now defend their practice in this way' (II 64) (οὔτοι μὲν νυν τοιαῦτα ἐπιλέγοντες ποιεῦσι ἔμοιγε οὐκ ἄρεστά).

Considering that his initial theme was Egyptian cleanliness, we may wonder at the comparatively lengthy aside on what other peoples are prepared to countenance in their temples and the kind of justification taken from the animal world. Herodotus asserts that he does not accept this: those who now argue like this are not to his liking. Why does Herodotus tell us this? What should his audience think at this point? We start with this example because it is a particularly vivid case where Herodotus gives an emphatic opinion of his own about a matter which had strong resonances in the second part of the fifth century. One of the elements of

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the new education parodied in Aristophanes' *Clouds* is precisely the way an appeal to behaviour in the animal kingdom may be made to justify human behaviour. Pheidippides tried to use this tactic against his father to justify beating him: the rooster and other animals fight their fathers, he insists, and the animals are no different from us except that they don't issue decrees. 'Why, then', his father retorted, 'since you imitate the rooster in everything, don't you eat dung and sleep on a perch?' (*Clouds* 1421–31). Quite so. This kind of argument was closely associated with the 'new education' of the so-called sophistic generation, with the nature–culture controversy so fashionable at the time, and with the type of clever arguments Pheidippides was hoping to learn in order to move up in the world. Pheidippides appealed to the animal kingdom as if to 'nature' and therefore to something that could be seen as fundamental and right; his father gave the essential deflationary retort. Such ideas go on being discussed and disliked, the appeal to nature being especially closely associated with immorality and hedonism.³

Similarly, I would suggest, with Herodotus' remarks about the behaviour of birds and beasts in temples, and the attempt to use these to justify similar human behaviour. This section in Book II seems too reminiscent of the kind of argument parodied in the *Clouds*, too close to the sort of appeal to the animal kingdom that Plato (for one) so disliked, for one not to suspect that Herodotus in a quiet way is referring to such ideas – and quietly, but explicitly, signalling his distaste.

The passage raises several issues which will form central themes of this book. It implies that Herodotus was familiar with at least some of the radical arguments of the 'Greek Enlightenment' of the second half of the fifth century, as we know from other sections of the *Histories*, and that he might know of them while at the same time dismissing them. It raises sharply the possibility that at least some of his ethnographical enquiries were carried out with a quite clear awareness of certain of the new ideas that began to circulate during that period. Indeed it suggests that there may be more of such awareness, lying beneath the text or alongside his long narrative sections, than is immediately apparent. It also illustrates the presence of semi-hidden controversy, or at the least, quiet but explicit assertions of Herodotus' opinions which contrast with his more indirect and suggestive method of making links in his narrative sections.

³ See Kerferd (1981a), ch. 10 and Guthrie (1971), ch. 4, esp. 99–101 for some arguments on the 'necessity' of following nature. Cf. Plato *Rep.* 586a1–b4 on the unthinking and beast-like pursuits of the common man; *Gorgias* 482c4–486d1 for examples of where the arguments from nature may lead.

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The *Histories* do have a contemporary context, though they relate events of long before, and it is argued here that it is that contemporary world which must do much to clarify their background, whether it is the intellectual world of the natural scientists (*physiologoi*), ‘sophists’ and doctors, or the milieu of the Homeric rhapsodes which deserve more focus – or simply the Greek world of the mid to late fifth century. Some of these ideas may seem difficult to reach, or perhaps one might doubt that he could have had access to new ideas so fast. Yet in a world in which intellectual communication is not necessarily dominated by the (slow) publication of books, but can happen instantly in oral colloquia or electronically by computer or telephone, we can perhaps better appreciate the possible importance of the contemporary world, as opposed to the world of the preceding twenty or fifty years, in forming a written work. While not forgetting their more traditional features and sources, I argue here that the *Histories* as we have them could not have come into being without the intellectual developments of the mid to late fifth century; that Herodotus needs to be seen more overtly than he usually is, as part of the world of Ionian and east Greek ‘science’ of the latter part of the fifth century. While not necessarily radical, he shared many of the interests and knew of some of the ideas that are visible in those conventionally known as the sophists and in early medicine (and by ‘sophists’, for the time being, I mean simply those principal thinkers such as Protagoras and Prodicus, usually denoted by this title). It is argued that the overt methodology, the combative style and the way in which Herodotus tries to persuade his audience that he has the appropriate authority, belong inseparably to that period; and that the orality of the *Histories* is not only that of the oral narrator (perhaps in the tradition of oral storytellers), but also in the more geographically and ethnographically oriented sections, the orality of the oral performance lecture.

The areas we consider further by way of introduction concern the following: whether Herodotus is essentially ‘archaic’, either in his storytelling or in his intellectual debts – that is, a writer who is essentially a product of early fifth- or late sixth-century Greek culture; the need for contemporary context for understanding his methods and ideas; his cultural background, the condition of Asia Minor and the relevance of travelling intellectuals.

Herodotus’ intellectual and cultural milieu

Herodotus’ intellectual context has of course been treated before, but it seems ripe for renewed and more extensive discussion. A common complaint in many works on Herodotus is that he is misleadingly regarded as

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Herodotus' intellectual and cultural milieu

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rather naive.⁴ Or even if it may be accepted that there are elements in Herodotus reminiscent of preoccupations of late fifth-century thinkers, the implications are not examined at any length, and he is frequently regarded as overwhelmingly 'archaic', an essentially traditional thinker and storyteller whose work bears more comparison with Homer and the lyric poets than with the writers and thinkers of his time. Much recent work has looked at his narrative techniques, the skilful way in which he wove together the various tales and traditions into a narrative thread which subtly directs his audience in a certain direction.⁵ It has been suggested with elegant economy that Herodotus was the last in a long line of Ionian prose storytellers,⁶ or that he was a *logios*, a professional oral storyteller of narratives of the past, perhaps similar to the guardians of the past described by anthropologists of Africa;⁷ or that he was more of a storyteller than a historian.⁸

Yet Herodotus' 'orality' – a slippery term at the best of times – is not sufficient to divorce him from the mid to late fifth-century world. And concentration upon his narrative techniques seems to have a tendency to archaize the *Histories* in a way which makes it virtually impossible to accommodate much of what he does elsewhere. It implicitly treats Herodotus as more old-fashioned than the period in which all agree he was still writing. Besides, the 'origins' of a genre (here, storytelling) are in danger of becoming a dominant explanation of the genre which he was writing so much later. The more traditional role of the poet in preserving fame is echoed by Herodotus in his clear intention to preserve memories (Proem), and there are other unmistakable Homeric resonances within the narrative of the Persian invasion; yet we also find him offering a critique of Homer and the 'Homeric' texts in a manner characteristic of the Homeric criticism in both Thucydides and amongst the participants portrayed in some Platonic dialogues.⁹ Alongside his well-recognized piety towards matters divine, in Book II we find him attempting to date the gods, or more precisely to fit the gods, the Egyptian traditions about the gods and the Greeks' discovery of these gods, into the long chronology of human history that he has himself devised (II 3.2–4; 43–5; 49–58; 143–6).

⁴ From Nestle back in 1908.

⁵ See e.g. Lang (1984); Erbse (1992); Boedeker (1988).

⁶ Murray (1987).

⁷ Evans (1991); cf. also Nagy (1987).

⁸ Erbse (1992) most recently.

⁹ Cf. Thucydides' rationalization of Homer in his *Archaiologia*; Hdt. II 53 on Homer's contribution to Greek knowledge of the gods; II 113–20 on Helen and the Trojan War. (Richardson (1975) deals more with the fifth-century exponents of Homeric allegory.) Xenophanes was also critical of Homer's account (e.g. DK 21, B11, 12), but within a poetic mould.

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The extensive presence of folk-tales, and of travellers' tales of exotic nature, tend, it is true, to give an air of traditionalism or archaism to some of Herodotus' narrative – the stories of Polycrates' ring or of Cyrus' upbringing, for instance, to take the most obvious, contain motifs which recur again and again in folk-tales all over the world. But it seems important to distinguish, insofar as one can, the kind of tales, traditions or folk-tales, which were likely to be available to any enquirer like Herodotus, and Herodotus' own use of them.¹⁰ It seems likely that many tales and traditions were still in circulation at the time he wrote them down (that does not, of course, mean that they were necessarily accurate memories of the past). Provided one does not take the view that Herodotus made up most of his narrative, it is then possible to say that he may have changed the emphasis, inserted the tales into larger, more meaningful narratives and historical patterning,¹¹ but to a large extent the repeated story-motifs may be a product of the traditions he picked up rather than his own creation. Anyone recording traditions is liable to change them in the process, even if this is a danger which is consciously being avoided,¹² but it would be going too far to say that they are in any serious sense new 'inventions'. He must have been at the mercy of his sources to some extent. Traditions which have been passed down over generations without fixed form are likely to conform ever more closely to the successive interests of new generations.¹³ The nature of those sources should presumably tell us something about the period (mid-fifth century and later) in which such traditions were still remembered, and sometimes they may tell us more about the reasons for their being remembered than about the period they purport to record.¹⁴ Inevitably they leave their traces in the *Histories*. But the presence of oral tradition there raises as many questions about the present as about the past.

Herodotus' intellectual affinities are perhaps most often connected by scholars with the generation of the 'Ionian Enlightenment' of the late sixth century (or earlier). Herodotus mentions Thales and Pythagoras, after all, as well as Hecataeus. The sensitive study by Gould, for instance, sees his important predecessors as Xenophanes, Pythagoras, Heraclitus,

¹⁰ Fowler (1996) is excellent on this; also Murray (1987) and (1993), 22–8; note also Luraghi (forthcoming).

¹¹ Cf. Erbse (1992) for the creation of historically meaningful narratives; on story-motifs, Aly (1921), and Griffiths (1987), (1989).

¹² See esp. Vansina (1985); also the earlier edition of (1973), Henige (1974).

¹³ See pertinent remarks by Murray (1987) on the clear improvement of Herodotus' information for the later periods.

¹⁴ See Thomas (1989): ch. 5 stresses that Herodotus must have used his informants – and several different ones – quite carefully.

the 'Milesians', and Hecataeus.¹⁵ Xenophanes' hint of cultural relativism, criticism of Homer, his scepticism about anthropomorphic gods, are often brought into play. But the fragments of Xenophanes are inevitably frustrating. He belonged perhaps to the generation of Herodotus' grandfather, and these questions all continue to be live issues in later decades. Other Presocratics are occasionally mentioned, especially Anaxagoras, though one senses that Herodotus was not much interested in the nature of being on the abstract level on which Anaxagoras discusses it.¹⁶ Certain sophists are also sometimes mentioned, most obviously Protagoras,¹⁷ but the implications remain unpursued. A pioneering article by Lateiner has recently analysed in detail certain affinities between Herodotus and the early medical writers, a connection noted before in more general terms.¹⁸ More frequently, however, it seems still to be assumed, at least in print, that these later developments in Greek intellectual life are irrelevant for Herodotus: again and again the *Histories* are pushed back to represent a more archaic form of thought, a more primitive form of writing. That view may be plausible – and it would be foolish to imply that there was nothing of the archaic world in the *Histories* – but in that case we should adjust our picture of late fifth-century Greece to accommodate such a writer who was active at least until the early years of the Peloponnesian War (mid 420s). It is perhaps the polymorphous nature of the *Histories* which seem in some respects to defy categorization, which makes it much more difficult to see Herodotus within his contemporary world than Thucydides.¹⁹ Moreover, coming from East Greece, Herodotus hailed

¹⁵ Implied, Gould (1989), 8. Of Halicarnassus, he says (p. 7), 'It was also, as Herodotus' own work shows, part of the thought-world that had been created already in the sixth century BC by the philosophical and scientific thinkers who worked in Miletus ... and in other Ionian Greek cities.'

¹⁶ A. Lloyd (1975) has an important section on Herodotus' intellectual affinities (ch. 4, esp. 156–70 on Presocratic speculation); for detailed comparison of method, D. Müller (1981); Nestle (1908) is still the fullest discussion. Immerwahr emphasizes the importance of the Heraclitean concept of balance between strife and cooperation (1966, 152–3); also (1956), 280: 'The rationalism of Herodotus follows the modes of thought of the Presocratic philosophers in its insistence on proportional relationships and analogy' – adding that it is all the more remarkable that he developed 'the tool of true historical causality to a large extent'; Pippidi (1960) stresses archaic mentality. See also ch. 5, pp. 135–6 below on the Nile.

¹⁷ E.g. Dewald and Marincola (1987); Lateiner (1989) – both in passing. The main treatments still remain Nestle (1908), Dihle (1962a), (1962b). Further refs. in nn. 52, 53.

¹⁸ Most often in connection with *Airs*. See Lateiner (1986), and (1989), less emphatically; G. E. R. Lloyd (1966) on Herodotus' use of analogy and inference; see also G. E. R. Lloyd (1979) for some use of Herodotus; earlier works compare Herodotus and *Airs* in particular (Nestle (1938), 25–7, for brief discussion of climate and ethnic character); for which see ch. 3.

¹⁹ For Thucydides, cf. Finley (1942) and (1967), Hornblower (1987). Hunter (1982), 283f., suggested a comparison between Herodotus and Thucydides in their relation to contemporary intellectual currents as 'a task for the future'.

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from a world that was less monoglot and considerably less unified culturally and politically than fifth-century Athens – we need perhaps to think more adventurously about the intellectual and social milieu in which we place him. Hartog suggested tentatively that Herodotus occupied a position half way between the sophist, who sold knowledge, and the rhapsode who sang Homeric verse, ‘but the relation of Herodotus to these groups has not been tackled’.²⁰ A recent article by Fowler (1996) may point to a similar way forward in its conclusion that Herodotus was really a *sophos*, a sage or man of wisdom.

The contemporary context has considerable importance for any interpretation of what he was trying to do, and how his *Histories* could be interpreted. In the lively and continuing debate about Herodotus’ methods of research, closely allied with that on his reliability, there is often little attempt to see such questions in a fifth-century context.²¹ For instance, the controversy over whether Herodotus was an accurate and a conscientious researcher (not necessarily the same thing) may be conducted at a bitter level.²² Yet in Fehling’s work on Herodotus’ ‘source-citations’, there is a striking absence of almost any contemporary cultural context. The reliability of Herodotus’ information is often initially judged by nineteenth- or twentieth-century standards of what he should have seen, and described, if he had visited a certain site. If Herodotus has failed by such a twentieth-century test, then, it is argued, he has made it up, and the fact that he attributes such and such a belief to Lydians or Egyptians only shows that these attributions too are totally fictional.²³ There is little attempt in such discussions to ask what might have been acceptable or ‘true’ to fifth-century Greeks, and comparisons are made with ancient literature of a much later date and later stage of cultural development. Similarly, as was pointed out by Cobet, it is difficult to believe that Herodotus should be producing a clever literary parody, equipt with seemingly accurate

²⁰ Hartog (1988), 361.

²¹ Lateiner (1986), exceptional in recent work on Herodotus’ method; also D. Müller (1981), who compares his method with that of the natural philosophers (but not medical works); Corcella’s thoughtful study (1984), emphasizes the natural philosophers, esp. Anaxagoras (and the gulf in conceptions about man and gods between Herodotus and sophists). Schepens (1975), on source theory, e.g., makes no connection with developments outside historiography, though he cites Heraclitus’ preference for ‘the eyes’ as sources over ‘the ears’.

²² E.g. Fehling (1989); Pritchett (1993).

²³ Cf. also Armayor (1978) on Herodotus’ supposed visit to the Black Sea; also (1980), (1985). Pritchett counter-attacks partly by arguing that certain phenomena *are* well attested, but also points out the obvious methodological flaw, that Fehling does not ask what kinds of things Greeks at the time were *prepared* to believe. Cf. also Thomas (1996).

source-citations, of a literary genre (i.e. history) that did not yet exist.²⁴ The controversy, stimulating as it has been, serves to highlight the need for more appreciation of Herodotus' intellectual milieu.

It is also particularly problematic, tempting though it is, to see the *Histories* against the later development of history writing. It is generally accepted that 'history' as a genre did not yet exist when Herodotus wrote, and it is a platitude that *historie* (literally 'enquiry') for Herodotus did not yet mean 'history', yet it always deserves reiterating. For if this is so, then it is misleadingly teleological to compare Herodotus only with a long line of historians, Hecataeus as a possible protohistorian, then Thucydides, and so on. Indeed such comparisons may in any case be pursuing only certain selected elements of the genre of ancient historiography; Hellenikos of Lesbos, after all, also wrote on Egypt, Scythia, and Persia as well as on the mythical and recent past.²⁵ Large sections of the *Histories* deal entirely with geography, ethnography and the culture of the known world. We misrepresent the *Histories* by seeing them primarily (or only) against the story of the development of history-writing.

What, then, is his contemporary world? Let us turn to Herodotus' origins in Asia Minor, and what that may imply for his cultural and intellectual allegiances.

East Greece and the travelling intellectual

Herodotus' home town, Halicarnassus, was a Greek city, in which Greeks and the non-Greek Carians seem to have intermingled. In Greek terms its inhabitants were Dorian in origin but to judge from surviving inscriptions it was Ionic in language and culture.²⁶ While it lay to the south of Ionia proper, it belonged with the other Greek cities of that coast as part of the intellectually and culturally thriving Greek communities of 'East

²⁴ Cobet (1974); note also the important remarks of Dewald and Marincola (1987), 26–32 and Marincola (1987), 126; Corcella (1984), 65–7 n. 32; Hornblower (1987), 17 ff.; Erbse on 'Fiktion und Wahrheit' (1991). Luraghi (forthcoming) is an important deconstruction of the 'source-citation' issue. For Fowler (1996, 86), 'He did not invent his sources; he discovered the *problem* of sources.'

²⁵ Cf. *FGH* 4, F53–5, 173–6, 64–5, 185–7, etc.: his relation to Herodotus is hard to gauge; for what it is worth, Porphyry thought he cribbed his *Barbarika nomima* from Herodotus and Damastes (F72). Cf. Hornblower (1994a) 55–6 on the problem of treating historiography as a 'succession' or *diadoche* (cf. also his Commentary vol. II, 19–38 on Thucydides and Herodotus); note also Humphreys (1997) for stimulating remarks on the history of historiography.

²⁶ See the mid-fifth-century law from Halicarnassus in Ionic script, ML 32.

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Greece'; Herodotus wrote in the Ionic dialect.²⁷ It was an area which had been first under Persian rule along with the Ionian cities to the north – Halicarnassians had to fight for Xerxes in the Persian Wars (Hdt. vii 99) – then again with the Ionian cities under the rule of the Athenian empire. Halicarnassus appears frequently, along with Cos, on the Athenian tribute lists. This might imply that that whole area, Ionian and Dorian, was a cultural backwater and poverty-stricken also, as has in fact been argued, in which case, we would have to envisage Herodotus turning with relief to the intellectual excitements of Athens. He was after all in exile for much of his life according to the biographical tradition. It might also imply that all he gained intellectually from the Ionian tradition harked back to the now elderly ideas of the early natural philosophers like Thales or Heraclitus. But this does not do justice to what we can glean from the admittedly difficult evidence from 'East Greece', that is, the western seaboard of Asia Minor, in the fifth century.²⁸ Closely related is the question of the vitality and energy of poets, writers and thinkers from that part of the world, and the possibility of their mobility.

Both areas deserve more analysis here since they subtly and implicitly percolate discussions of the *Histories* and modern Athenocentrism tends to underestimate the importance of East Greece. In simplified terms, such a view sees Athens not only as the centre of intellectual life, as indeed it was, but also the only place where intellectual activity is thriving in the second half of the fifth century; Ionia is in terminal decline since the Persian conquest, the members of its sixth-century 'Ionian Enlightenment' disperse to the West, the coast of Asia Minor stagnates culturally and economically and while Athens is a ferment of activity, the rest of the Greek world is in danger of being ignored. This assumption is visible in the common idea, for instance, that what little knowledge Herodotus had of current natural philosophy and sophistic ideas, could only have been gleaned at Athens (or alternatively at Thurii, an Athenian-led colony); and that other writers or poets can only come into their element when

²⁷ See the excellent picture of Halicarnassus and its culturally mixed character between Greeks, Carians and Persians, in Gould (1989), ch. 1. On Asia Minor more generally in the fifth century: Cook (1961) and (1962), Balcer (1985), (1991), with remarks below, pp. 14–15; Hornblower (1982a) and (1994c), ch. 8a; Hanfmann (1953); articles in *REA* 87 (1985); Mitchell (1989–90) on recent archaeological discoveries.

²⁸ If he really spent many years in Thurii, it is remarkably hard to see much in the *Histories* that might derive from the West Greek world; Pythagoras was widely known, and the geography of the western Mediterranean is conspicuous by its near absence. How and Wells, vol. 1, 8–9 offer some evidence that Herodotus returned from Thurii to Athens.