

1 Introduction and the kidnapping of women



The Persian empire and neighbouring territories in the fifth century BC.

Although Herodotus' work culminates in the great battles of 490 BC and 480–479 BC, his work is remarkable in its range. He begins with the world of myth and travels through many places and over generations in time to explore the relations between the Greeks and the Persians.

Introduction

This is the presentation of the **enquiry** of **Herodotus of Halicarnassus**. The purpose of this work is to ensure that the actions of mankind are not rubbed out by time, and that great and wondrous deeds, some performed **by the Greeks, some by non-Greeks**, are not without due **glory**. In particular, the purpose is to explain **why** they waged war against each other.

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enquiry this is a translation of the Greek word, *historie*: its related verb means ‘to ask a question’. Thus, Herodotus’ work is not necessarily history in our narrow sense. It can be about anything that he can find out through asking questions.

Herodotus of Halicarnassus Herodotus identifies himself and his origins in what are in the Greek the first two words of his narrative. He is no impersonal or invisible narrator but a narrator whose character and judgements and opinions are constantly visible. Halicarnassus is one of the great cities of Ionia, modern-day Bodrum on the southern coast of modern Turkey. The Greeks colonized the east coast of the Aegean around 1000 BC and the cities they founded there, like Miletus and Ephesus, became some of the great cities of the Greek world. It was also these cities that were closest to the non-Greek world of Lydia and Persia.

by the Greeks, some by non-Greeks ‘non-Greeks’ translates the Greek word *barbaroi*. It was used to describe non-Greek speakers perhaps because their language sounded like the bleating of sheep. Although the word comes to mean barbarian in our sense of uncivilized, that is not what it meant to Herodotus. One of his great strengths is that his account does present both sides of the world and both sides of the war. Indeed, there is more time and space given over to the non-Greek world, and Plutarch, a Greek writer of the second century AD, criticizes Herodotus for being *philobarbaros*, a lover of the barbarian. From now on *barbaros* is translated as ‘barbarian’ for the sake of simplicity.

glory the Greeks are immensely conscious of the need to preserve the greatness of human achievement. The purpose goes back to Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, the first works of Greek literature, written down towards the end of the eighth century BC. Achilles and the other heroes at Troy fight to win and fight for honour, but they are also fighting for glory (*kleos*), the chance to be remembered long after they are dead. As Hector says in *Iliad* 7.81–91, when he challenges Ajax to single combat:

And if I kill him, and Apollo grants my prayer, I shall strip his armour and carry it back to sacred Ilios, and hang it in dedication at the temple of Apollo the far-shooter, but his body I shall return to the well-benched ships, so that the long-haired Achaians can give the rites of burial and heap a mound for him by the broad Hellespont. And people will say, even men of generations not yet born, as they sail by over the sparkling sea in their many-benched ships: ‘This is the mound of a man who died long ago. He was the greatest of men, and glorious Hektor killed him.’ This is what they will say: and my glory will never die.

Translation by J. M. Hammond

why perhaps this word represents the beginning of the writing of history as we conceive it. Events can be remembered and recorded, but Herodotus brings the purpose of explaining the causes of events. Although his approach to narrative is often through the telling of stories rather than specific analysis, the stories are his way of exploring causation.

The kidnapping of women 1.1–5

- 1.1 **Learned Persians** say that the **Phoenicians** were responsible for the falling out. Their account is that the Phoenicians came **to this sea** from what is called the Red Sea and settled in the land that they occupy to this day. They undertook great sea voyages, carrying cargo from **Egypt and Assyria**. They visited other countries and they also came to **Argos**. At this time Argos was pre-eminent amongst all the cities 5 in the land which is now called Greece. When the Phoenicians got to Argos, they laid out their goods for sale. On the fifth or sixth day after their arrival, when they had sold almost everything, lots of women came down to the shore, including the king's daughter. Her name – and the Greeks agree on this – was **Io**, the daughter

Learned Persians Herodotus begins with the world of myth, which was central to the minds of the ancient Greeks. This is not, in itself, an unexpected place to start. However, it is strange that Herodotus should start, and largely stay, with what he claims to be a Persian account of Greek myth. It is also strange that these myths, normally full of wonders and metamorphosis, should be told in a deliberately realistic way. All of this narrative is presented in indirect speech, making it clear that it is meant to be the Persian account: it is specifically not Herodotus'. Despite making the stories seem realistic, Herodotus does refer obliquely to the better-known versions of the stories: the Greek reader would know what he meant.

Phoenicians the Phoenicians occupied the land which is now part of Syria and Lebanon: their two great ports were Tyre and Sidon. They were the great seafarers and traders of the eastern Mediterranean who also founded colonies in the western Mediterranean, Carthage and Cadiz. The Greeks' great debt to the Phoenicians was their alphabet; the Greeks adapted it towards the end of the eighth century BC, when they came into contact with them through trade. See 5.58 for Herodotus' account of the Greeks' taking of the Phoenician alphabet.

to this sea Herodotus means the Mediterranean: the Greeks not only occupied mainland Greece, the islands of the Aegean and Ionia, but also sent out colonies to Sicily, southern Italy and beyond.

Egypt and Assyria these were the two great and prosperous empires of the time before the Persian empire. The location of Phoenicia meant that the Phoenicians were ideally placed to transport the goods of these two largely land-locked countries.

Argos a city-state in the north-east of the Peloponnese. In the Mycenaean age (1600–1200 BC) it had been a major city: one of the most common names for the Greeks in the *Iliad* is 'Argives'.

Io any Greek would know the myth of Io; she was the priestess of Hera at Argos, but was seduced by Zeus. She was transformed into a white cow, either by Zeus or by Hera, and was watched over by the monster Argos. Hermes killed Argos, but Io was driven mad by a gadfly sent by Hera and she wandered the earth until finally she came to Egypt. There she was restored by Zeus to her human form and gave birth to Epaphus, the ancestor of Danaus. Danaus later returned to Argos to become king. The Greek myth has nothing quite so commonplace as Phoenician traders stealing local girls.

of Inachus. Well, they were all standing around by the sterns and buying the goods 10
 that most appealed to them, and then the Phoenicians gave the word and went for
 them. Most of the women got away but Io and some others were captured. The
 Phoenicians put them onto their ships and sailed away back to Egypt.

- 1.2 This is the Persians' account of how Io came to Egypt – **although the Greeks**
don't agree – and they say that this was the beginning of the acts of injustice. 15
 They go on to say that, after this, some Greeks – they can't give any name to them
 – came to Tyre in Phoenicia and seized **Europa**, the daughter of the king. These



The Rape of Europa, by the eighteenth-century Italian artist Francesco Zuccarelli. The traditional story of Zeus tricking Europa in the shape of a bull and carrying her off to Crete was a very popular subject for artists from the sixth century BC onwards. This painting conveys the misplaced delight of Europa and her friends as she sets forth with Zeus.

although the Greeks don't agree Herodotus knowingly nods at the rich Greek version of the myth described in the previous note.

Europa the daughter of the king of Phoenicia. Zeus fell in love with her as she played on the seashore. He turned himself into a beautiful bull and enticed her by his mildness to get onto his back. The bull then plunged into the sea and swam to Crete. Europa bore Zeus two or three sons: Minos, the king of Crete and keeper of the Minotaur; Rhadamanthys, who became a judge in the underworld; and Sarpedon, a hero at Troy. In 4.46 Herodotus questions whether Europe could be named after Europa, not least because she never visited Europe.

would have been **Cretans**. They reckon that this was tit for tat, but it was hereafter the Greeks who were responsible for the second crime. For they sailed in a warship to **Aea** in Colchis and the river Phasis and then, when they had done **all that they had come to do**, they seized **Medea**, the daughter of the king. The king of Colchis sent a messenger to Greece and demanded **retribution for the kidnap**, asking for the return of his daughter. The **Greeks' reply** was that, since they hadn't given any retribution for the kidnap of Io, they couldn't see why they should give them any. 20

- 1.3 In the **next generation** after this **Alexander**, the son of Priam, who had heard all of these stories, wanted to get a wife from Greece by kidnapping; he knew very well that he wouldn't face any punishment, since everyone else had got away with it. So he kidnapped Helen and the Greeks decided to send messengers to ask for the return of Helen and demand retribution for the kidnap. When they produced this 25

Cretans as in the story of Io, Herodotus hints at the accepted Greek version of the myth by referring obliquely to the destination of the bull.

Aea on the eastern coast of the Black Sea, a very long way from Phoenicia and Argos.
all that they had come to do Herodotus suppresses the mythical part of the story, described in the note below.

Medea Jason and the Argonauts set forth to Colchis to steal the Golden Fleece. Medea, the daughter of Aeëtes, the king of Colchis, fell in love with Jason and then helped him to kill the fire-breathing dragon that guarded the Golden Fleece. With Jason she left her father and home and slowed down her pursuers by cutting her brother into pieces and throwing the bits into the sea.

retribution for the kidnap Herodotus creates a pattern in his narrative by repetition of the words for retribution and kidnap. The first of these two words is critical to the whole of Herodotus' history. There is a pattern in events of repayment: men repay men for the deeds they do and the gods also pay men back for what they have done. As W. H. Auden wrote in his poem *September 1, 1939*, 'Those to whom evil is done, Do evil in return.'

Greeks' reply Herodotus makes a link between the stories by making the Greeks refer to the previous kidnap to justify their action. Such joining of usually separate myths to create a causal link is unexpected. In the usual version, Medea wasn't kidnapped; she chose to go with Jason.

next generation Greek myth doesn't really have a strict chronology, but there is a sense that it comes in two generations; the sons of the men who accompanied Jason on the *Argo* were the heroes of the Trojan War. Even so, Herodotus is once again making the mythological age sound like historical time.

Alexander the alternative name for Paris, the son of King Priam and the brother of Hector. Like the Argonauts, Paris and the Trojans see themselves as part of this sequence of kidnaps, and base their actions on previous events. As far as we know, this creation of the link is the invention of Herodotus.

argument, **the other side referred** to the kidnapping of Medea; since they hadn't made any retribution or even given the girl back when they were asked, how could they come wanting retribution from others? That was their argument.

- 1.4 Until this point it had just been a matter of kidnapping from each other, but now the Greeks were very much to blame. For they were the first to launch an invasion against Asia, rather than the other way about. The barbarians reckoned that stealing women was an act of injustice, but **it was silly to make too much of a fuss** about getting retribution for kidnapped women. It was only sensible to treat it as of no account; it's obvious that, if a woman didn't want to get kidnapped, it wouldn't happen. The Persians say that, when the women were being kidnapped, the Asians didn't consider it important, but it was the Greeks who, for the sake of a Spartan woman, gathered together a great expedition, went to Asia and destroyed the power of Priam. For that reason **they have always considered the Greeks to be their enemy. For the Persians claim Asia and the barbarian tribes that live there as their own, whereas they consider that Europe and Greece are something separate.**

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The abduction of Helen is depicted here on an Etruscan urn. For more on Helen, see the Oxford Classical Dictionary.

the other side referred once again Herodotus makes a link in the narrative between his stories. It is not likely that the Trojans referred to Jason and Medea in their negotiations over Helen.

it was silly to make too much of a fuss the use to which Herodotus puts myth is very striking here. The tone of this account is very worldly and cynical.

they have always considered the Greeks to be their enemy underlying Herodotus' telling of these myths is the sense that there has been long-standing division, enmity and distrust between East and West. Whatever the reality of the stories told here, the two worlds have always been enemies and that lives on in the fifth century.

For the Persians claim Asia ... something separate Herodotus returns to this theme at the end of his narrative (see 9.116, p. 143).

1.5 This is the Persians' account of events and their conclusion is that the fall of Troy was the beginning of the enmity with the Greeks. The **Phoenicians**, however, do not agree with the Persians about Io. They say that they didn't have to kidnap her to bring her to Egypt. Rather, she had slept with the ship's captain in Argos and, when she realized that she was pregnant, she was too ashamed to tell her parents. 50 So she sailed willingly with the Phoenicians to avoid getting found out.

Now that is what the Persians and the Phoenicians say, but **I am not going to say** whether things happened this way or that way. I am going to start with the first person whom I myself know to have started acts of injustice towards the Greeks. I will then proceed in my account, dealing with **small cities as much as great cities**. 55 For of the cities that were great in the past, many of them are now small, and cities that are great in my time were small before. I know that **human happiness does not stay for long in the same place**, so I will make mention of both equally.

The purpose of history

At the very beginning of his work, Herodotus gives a very clear account of his purpose in writing. It is worth comparing similar statements made by other Greek and Roman historians, to see not only how purposes can differ, but also how the difference in purpose affects the difference in content and approach. In the two accounts given here, Thucydides was writing between 431 and at least 404 BC; and Livy lived between c. 57 BC and AD 17.

Perhaps my work will seem less pleasurable to hear because it lacks the element of story-telling. However, if all those who wish to see clearly what has happened – and what is likely to happen again in the future in the same or similar way, since that is human nature – judge my work to be useful, that will be enough for me. This work is laid down to be a possession for all time rather than a performance for an immediate audience.

Thucydides, *A History of the Peloponnesian War* 1.22

Phoenicians once again Herodotus presents this rationalization and normalization of Greek myth.

I am not going to say after giving this version of events, an attempt to make history out of myth, Herodotus does not give it any authorial support. He starts with things that he knows. His way, following his own enquiries, will be different and better.

small cities as much as great cities, human happiness does not stay for long in the same place this is fundamental to Herodotus and secures his greatness. His work is about the fragility of humanity and success, and that very fragility is the reason why things, even obscure things in obscure places, need recording. Who is to know what will happen in the future? Even the Tin Islands (see 3.115, p. 37) might become the centre of the world at some point in history. The richness of Herodotus' narrative springs from his fundamental view of the world.

For my part, I would urge each of you to turn your attention to these issues: how they lived their lives, and what sort of men and what sort of skills it took to bring to birth and then increase this empire, both at home and on military campaign. Then each of you should follow in your minds how, as traditional teaching gradually slipped away, morality first became unsteady and then began more and more to decline so that in the end it totally collapsed. Now we have come to a time when we can endure neither our vices nor their remedies.

In your consideration of this story, there is one thing that is especially beneficial and fruitful, and that is to gaze upon the evidence of every example of behaviour, gathered together as if on a shining monument. There you will find things to be imitated by you and your city, and things, foul through and through, to be avoided. For either the love of the task which I have undertaken has deceived me or there has never been a city greater nor more devoted to the gods, nor richer in good models of behaviour, nor any city to which greed and extravagance have come so late, nor where so much honour has been given for so long to thrift and moderation.

Livy, *History of Rome*, Preface 9–11

- 1 What is Herodotus' purpose? What impact is that likely to have on the things that he might include?
- 2 What has Herodotus done to the stories that he tells? What does he introduce? What does he omit? How does he join them up?
- 3 At the end of his narrative, Herodotus does not vouch for the truth of all these stories. In that case, why does he bother telling them at all?
- 4 Are the stories of rape and kidnap funny? If so, how and why?
- 5 How does Herodotus' purpose differ from the purposes of Thucydides and Livy? What other reasons are there for writing history?