

Herodotus and the Ends of the World

Herodotus, born ca. 490 BC in Halicarnassus, in Asia Minor, to a prominent family, left, either exiled or a voluntary expatriate, when a tyranny was established in his city and political troubles erupted. After some time on the island of Samos, he travelled throughout the Greek world. In Athens in the mid-440s he became the friend of Pericles and later went to South Italy, perhaps as a member of an Athenian colony. He mentions events no later than 430 BC, so we assume he died around then.

Herodotus wrote the Histories of the Persian wars (490s to 478 BC (Historie in Greek means inquiry or investigation.) He has been called "the father of history," because he writes with an analytical mind, systematic methodology and a comprehensiveness which had never been attempted before, and with a clear understanding of the importance which these wars had for the future development of Greece and the Mediterranean world. His first sentence reveals his goals and his approach: "I, Herodotus of Halicarnassus, am writing this history so that the great deeds of the Greeks and the foreigners will not be forgotten, and, in addition to this, to show the reason why they fought one another." He begins by defining the scope of his investigation in time and space: chronologically, he starts with the animosities between East and West which began in the distant past, and follows them down to the time of the Ionian revolt which just precedes the Persian invasion and signals the true beginning of the conflict. Geographically, in order to explain the different natures and backgrounds of the two camps, he undertakes an extensive investigation into their past and gives an account of how the two enemies acquired their present power. In doing this, Herodotus gives a wealth of information about the history of Greece and about the expansion of the Persian empire, its administrative structure, finances, etc. Once having established the necessary framework for the reader's understanding of the conflict, he makes his famous digressions; that is, he provides material which, although not directly associated with the conflict between the Greeks and the Persians, is too interesting to be left out.

Herodotus is also the product of a long Ionian literary tradition, whose representatives, logographers, prose writers, were the forerunners of the historians proper, in that they wrote about wars of the past, family genealogies, and similar topics, showing considerable interest in the geographical, ethnographical and anthropological aspects of lands outside the immediate Greek world. Although their stories were not inventions, it was important for their narrative to captivate the audience. Herodotus inherited this love for beautiful stories and interesting material dealing with geographical or ethnographical issues and whenever possible, he supplied episodes with a specific moral meaning, or a revelation of the wonderful and the marvelous which lies outside the ordinary realm of everyday life in the Greek world.

Herodotus may be the first to describe places and peoples beyond the immediate neighbors of the Greeks, commonly through military expeditions of the Persians: the north for Darius against the Scythians; the south for Cambyses against the Egyptians and Ethiopians; more when Herodotus refers to the administrative and taxation districts of the Persian empire; and the far west in a short digression from the subject of the Phocaeans, supposedly the first Greeks to discover that region.

Herodotus' references to the "ends" of the world imply that he sees himself at a center, with the degree of remoteness and oddity (thoma), of these peripheral regions defined by the standards of this center's own geographical location, the characteristics of its physical environment, and its social and religious notions. For the Greeks, the geographical center of the earth was Delphi. Under the influence of both Anaximander and Hecataeus, whose geographical theories were governed by the

principle of symmetry, Herodotus relies on maps with an equator passing through the Pillars of Heracles (Gibraltar), Delphi, and the Taurus mountains, dividing the world symmetrically into two halves, such that new information can be inferred from that already known by the process of analogy. Since the Ister River rises in the region of the Celts and passes eastward through Europe, so the Nile must have its sources in the western parts of Libya and cross North Africa eastwards.

Herodotus' accuracy of information is in inverse proportion to geographical distance from the center: the more remote a country, the more need to rely on hearsay, and the higher the risk of receiving distorted facts, causing disagreements among scholars about the precise geographical locations of the numerous Herodotean references. Still, roughly the boundaries of his world are India in the East, the Iberian Peninsula, the western parts of Africa, and perhaps England in the West, central Europe to perhaps Afghanistan in the North; and Arabia, Ethiopia, and perhaps Lake Chad and the River Niger (central West Africa) in the South.

India, the most distant nation known in the East, appears for the first time in the Histories in a way which underlines its "otherness." When king Darius of Persia asks the Greeks what would persuade them to eat their dead parents, they say there is no price in the world for which they would do it. The Indians, however, summoned afterwards, who by custom devour their dead parents, describe the Greek custom of burning the bodies of their fathers as an unspeakable outrage. Cannibalism among certain Indian tribes not only shows the subjectivity of the customs in any given geographical area; it also reveals the Herodotean distinction between center periphery, seen also in its natural oddities, and its peculiar animal life. Herodotus recounts the Persian story that in the Indian desert there are giant ants, smaller than dogs but larger than foxes, dwelling underground, digging out sand full of gold. Prospecting for this sand is not only physically demanding, but also extremely dangerous, because these ants are formidable and ferocious creatures. The earnestness with which Herodotus treats this suggests he considers such ants as an interesting and rare natural peculiarity. If even distant rumors had reached the Mediterranean from its Persian source, the audience would expect to hear about it in an account of India; failure to refer to it might jeopardize the credibility of Herodotus' narrative. The same motif appears even as late as the 16th century AD. Nearchus, Alexander's admiral, reports that he has seen, not the ants themselves but only their skins, which "are like those of panthers." A Medieval report of the Far East mentions ants seven feet long, equipped with wings; in 1559 the Sultan Soliman is presented with an Indian ant "of the size of a medium dog." In all these cases, the authors believe or, at any rate, make their audiences believe, in gold-digging ants.' Indian birds and animals are supposed to be much bigger than those of other lands. Wild trees supply the inhabitants with wool much superior to that of sheep. Even animals well-known in other regions appear different here (e.g., the back legs of the camels have four thigh bones and four knee joints). The climate, too, is peculiar here because of the special relationship of the region to the sun: according to the historian, the hottest part of the day is in the morning. The heat of the midday is the same as elsewhere; however, as the sun moves more and more towards the west, the day becomes ever cooler, until at sunset it is very cold. Herodotus believes the earth is flat, and thus infers that India, the most remote region in the Far East, is closest to the sun's rising, and therefore at its hottest in the morning, cool at sunset.

Herodotus describes Arabia as a land of mysterious spices. Incense is gathered by burning some kind of gum to smoke out the numerous winged snakes which guard the spice-producing trees. Laudanum, this most sweet perfume, is found in the beards of male goats, a place proverbially foul-smelling. The reference to Arabia illuminates the methodology of the historian in approaching the thomata of the periphery. Herodotus describes the adventurous harvesting of the spices in ascending order from moderate oddity to extreme oddity. The harvesting of laudanum is described by the historian as the most noteworthy of all Arabia's thomata, because it contradicts the very logic on which Greek thought has been built. The male goat is very familiar to the Greeks for the unbearable smell of its beard. That a most wonderful fragrance comes from a place which normally gives off the worst odor is a blatant contradiction of Greek experience and utterly violates the way in

which the historian and his audience perceive and understand the world. A Greek can accept this co-existence of two opposites only as a very rare exception.

Arabian stories probably reach the historian through the Phoenicians, with some influences perhaps from Egypt. Remember that the Phoenicians were merchants, and that an exaggeration of the dangers involved in procuring their products would increase their value. This may help us understand the persistence of certain themes and images like snakes, winged guardians, unknown places, and the like.

Of Ethiopia, west of Arabia, Herodotus gives a compact description: "this country produces great quantities of gold, has an abundance of elephants and all the woodland trees, and ebony; and its men are the tallest, the most handsome, and the longest lived." Homer, in the beginning of the *Odyssey*, had mentioned Zeus' feasting with the "blameless" Ethiopians, a poetic tradition which may have encouraged Herodotus to place in their land such wondrous spectacles as the famous "table of the sun", a meadow which, by its own accord, supplies the people with all kinds of boiled meat, perhaps a variant of the Homeric theme of the gods feasting with the Ethiopians, as well as of the Hesiodic myth of the age of gold, when gods and mortals still dwelt together and shared the same banquets. When the Persian king Cambyses offers the Ethiopian king gifts--a purple cloak, golden ornaments, and perfumes--the king calls them "deceitful", because dye disguises real colors and perfumes, real smells. He characterizes the gold necklace and bracelets as fetters. Cambyses naively attempts to apply the laws of the ordinary in a country of the extraordinary: gold is so abundant there that it is not even considered precious. Conventional perfumes are meaningless, since the water of the spring of youth smells as exquisite as if it were infused with violets.

Libya (central and northern Africa as a whole rather than only the country known by this name today), too, becomes increasingly exotic as we move away from the shores of the Mediterranean.

Here live huge snakes, lions, elephants, horned asses, wild men and women, men that squeak like bats, men that have no name and see no dreams, men with the head of dogs, men without heads who have their eyes in their breast. Even Herodotus himself is overwhelmed by the weight of this extraordinary account and feels the need to distance himself by using the expression "as the Libyans say."

For the far west, Herodotus' reference to the Iberian Peninsula is fragmentary, limited and vague. The region may have been explored by Greeks as early as the second half of the 8th century BC; Herodotus informs us that when the Phocaeans arrived at Tartessus, a city or a region there, they became friends with its king, Arganthonios, who ruled the country for eighty years and lived for one hundred and twenty. His wealth and prosperity were famous in the ancient world: when he fails to persuade the Phocaeans to accept his invitation and settle in his country and learns that the Median power is increasing at the expense of the Greek cities in Asia Minor, he gives them enough money to surround their city with defensive walls. The abundance of gold, silver, bronze, and iron rumored to lie in the region make some scholars refer to Iberia as the Eldorado of the ancient world. But Herodotus also knows of the Celts, beyond the Pillars of Heracles, and of the Cynesians, at the farthest point of the continent westwards, though does not discuss these latter.

For the North, Herodotus knows Europe represents an enormous geographical puzzle primarily because little can be said about its morphology, size, borders, and peoples, real or legendary. He rejects the traditional belief that Ocean surrounds the entire earth and that the three continents, Europe, Asia & Libya, i.e., Africa, are symmetrical in every respect, because Europe remains a mystery. The historian stresses the probable invalidity of certain traditional references to places like the "Tin-islands" or the River Eridanus, and mythological peoples like the one-eyed Arimaspians that steal gold from griffins.

Herodotus' mentions the peoples who live successively north and west of known peoples, until he reaches places which are either imaginary or unknown. He starts from the region around Olbia ("the fortunate one"), a Milesian colony on the Black Sea, the most important Greek center north of that sea. From there a gradual descent into an increasingly misty world leads to territories more and more remote and more fabulous. The Callipidae, a Greco-Scythian tribe, and their immediate neighbors the Alazones, still cultivate the earth despite their adoption of Scythian ways, a smooth transition from the genuine Greekness of Olbia to the alienness of Scythian nomadic life.

Herodotus' account of various northern tribes provokes disagreements among scholars, who attempt to identify the exact location of peoples so obscure that they belong as much to myth as to history. The historian himself explains that the sources of his information about the Issedones, who perhaps lived between the Ural mountains and Afghanistan, are the Greeks of Olbia and other commercial colonies on the Black Sea, as well as Scythian travellers. The Issedones and the Androphagi practice cannibalism, the Argippeans (the bald men) have allegedly reached a state equivalent to our sainthood. These, even though remote and little known, are still within the territory of the real world. But the high and impassable mountains beyond the bald men as well as the "showers of feathers" (a Scythian metaphor interpreted by Herodotus as snow) are natural boundaries beyond which are men with goat's feet, people who sleep for six months, one-eyed Arimaspians, griffins which guard gold, and the legendary Hyperboreans. Herodotus, momentarily skeptical, feels the Arimaspians, otherwise like the rest of men, cannot be so peculiar when it comes to their eyes. but then notes that the edges of the world possess wonders about which no one can speak with confidence.

The chapters of the Histories related to the periphery of the world abound in incredible creatures, natural wonders, alien customs, idealized peoples. When Herodotus describes the extremities of the inhabited territories, he consistently sees thoma as characteristic of the eschatiai (the ends of the inhabited world). Gold is plentiful, even where the regions are actually poor in this precious metal, like India. When gold is not mentioned, there is always a substitute equally attractive, like the expensive perfumes and spices of Arabia. Herodotus uses superlatives to portray these legendary people: the Ethiopians are the tallest, most handsome, and longest-lived of all men; the Libyans are the healthiest; the Troglodytae the swiftest. Indian animals are larger than anywhere else -- all due to the climate, which at the edges of the world is extreme, while the center is tempered by a mixture of weathers. Herodotus places the fabulous at the edges of (or beyond) the known world not only because it is outside the possibility of verifiable knowledge, but because, as we move toward the edges, we encounter more extreme conditions, and therefore both natural and cultural responses to these conditions which are outside the familiar norms. The ancients did not distinguish between real geography and the realm of myth, and, likewise, between rational and irrational tales, just varying degrees of certitude, corresponding to the varying degrees of distance from the known center.

Herodotus' descriptions of the peripheral peoples include some of the following: they generally represent a lower level of technology; their lives are long, simple and rough (what anthropologists call "hard primitivism"); they practice justice; they live on raw meat and milk (the wine to which they are not accustomed has a seductive power on them); they do possess gold but, since the quantities are large, they do not attach any value to it; they are sexually promiscuous and in certain cases they have their encounters in the open "like beasts." The extremities of the world contain the rarest and most exquisite things, but acquired by hard and risky effort. The Herodotean thoma is not necessarily without dangers; the edges of the world, no matter how wondrous, are not equivalent to romanticized Utopias.

Extraordinary things, thomata, are not confined solely to the ends of the world, however, although, statistically speaking, the overwhelming majority are found in the remotest places. Wonders also occur in Greece, and Herodotus has a rare gift for narrating them with grace and eloquence. (1) Arion, the renowned singer, is miraculously rescued by dolphins on his way home from Sicily when

the sailors decide to rob him and do away with him. Arion pleads for his life unsuccessfully, but he asks at least to be dressed in his ceremonial robes that he might sing for one last time. When he has sung a hymn to Apollo and thrown himself into the sea, a dolphin rescues him miraculously by carrying him to the southernmost tip of the Peloponnese. When the sailors return to shore and are asked where Arion is, they respond that he has decided to stay in Sicily. They are struck speechless when Arion appears in his ceremonial robes, and they are forced to reveal the whole scheme. (2) Polycrates, tyrant of Samos, so succeeds in everything that his friend Amasis, king of Egypt, advises him to fail in something to avoid the envy of the gods. Polycrates thus throws his most valuable ring into the sea, to experience the sorrow of its loss. A few days later, however, Polycrates receives a fish as a gift from a fisherman --with the lost ring inside. Amasis realizes that Polycrates is doomed and breaks off his friendship. Some time later Polycrates meets a most horrible death.(3) When the Persians,invading Greece, are about to attack the oracle of Delphi, they see two giants come to the defense of the temple; panic-stricken, they retreat and Delphi is saved. Later the locals identify the two supernatural creatures as Phylacus and Autonomous, two heroes of the area who came to defend the sacred center.

These thomata take place not at the edges of the world but in Greece. But all three stories have a moral significance, since in one way or another they reflect the major motifs which underline the whole narrative of the Histories, namely that injustice earns one the hatred of the gods and is bound to be revealed; and that no one can escape his fate and avert the future. The thoma within the Greek world is not a permanent feature of the landscape or the natural world, seen at will, but manifested to specific persons and under particular circumstances, something unique both in space and time. The wonders of the eschatiai, on the other hand, can be experienced by anybody there, but to witness them is not easy, since these lands are the remotest on earth and often belong more to the mythical geography than to the real one. A thoma becomes ordinary when incorporated into one's natural environment or part of one's daily routine. The wondrous is thus geographically and culturally bound and cannot be absolute. What appears as thoma in the Greek world is normal or typical at the edges of the earth and vice versa. Even the whole concept of the edges of the earth implies a center: Greece. Nature here in the center is normative, natural, while that found far from the center is unnatural, wondrous; and Herodotus' whole concept of thoma underlines this distinction.