HERODOTUS,
MILITARY AND CULTURAL HISTORIAN

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Herodotus of Halicarnassus (c. 485-425 BC)\(^1\) wrote the first extant history of Greek civilization. His sweeping work, the *Histories*, combined his own observations, gathered through his research and travels, with legends and stories provided by other historical accounts. Some of what Herodotus related is verifiable and likely to be an accurate account of the events described. However, modern historians have discovered that some of the information included in the *Histories* is unverifiable and likely untrue. Despite these caveats, the *Histories* has great historical and cultural value. Not only is this the case because historians have no alternative than to look to Herodotus due to the lack of other sources, but also because those parts of the *Histories* that are believed to have been fabricated still have value as a window into the mindset of Herodotus and the times in which he lived. Herodotus’ *Histories* remains a valuable source for military history, as it is the most important extant source regarding the Persian Wars, as well as cultural history of the Greeks and other civilizations in southeastern Europe, northeastern Africa, and southwest Asia.

Herodotus appears to have traveled widely, recording his observations along the way. He describes the embalming rituals of Egypt, the sacrificial customs of the Scythians, and the organization of the Persian Empire. Perhaps, as some scholars believe, Herodotus sailed as a merchant seaman, providing the opportunity for him to visit a vast geographical area. It is also possible, however, that he did not travel so extensively but rather took information from earlier writers and claimed to have gathered the information himself.\(^2\) At times, Herodotus admits that he gained some of his information from unreliable sources, such as the Peloponnesian tale of

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\(^{2}\) Ibid.
Anacharsis and the Scythian king. Herodotus recounts that Anacharsis had been sent by the king of Scythia to learn Greek ways. Herodotus dismisses the story as “pointless,” reminding the reader that he had already explained that Anacharsis was dead. It is certainly possible that Herodotus told this story as it actually happened or as he heard it from other sources, but it is also possible that he contrived the tale to shed light on Scythian politics and the Scythian opinion of the Greeks. Either way, the story has cultural value to modern historians.

Some of what Herodotus relates is certainly verifiable, and therefore credible, based on archaeological discoveries. One such example is the location of battlefields mentioned by Herodotus. Many of these battlefields were found and investigated by a team of researchers in the early 1900s and are listed in Johannes Kromayer and Georg Veith’s *Battle Atlas of Ancient Military History*. By providing detailed descriptions of the geography of the various battles in the *Histories*, Herodotus has helped modern historians preserve what otherwise would have been lost to modern agriculture, roads, and urbanization. Knowing the location of the battlefields offers military historians a method of calculating travel time for ancient advancing armies, the amount of supplies that may have been necessary to sustain an army of a given size, and other valuable details.

Unfortunately, in the *Histories* there is far more unverifiable than verifiable evidence. As Richard Gabriel contends, “The sources Herodotus…used for the Greco-Persian Wars are little more than monument inscriptions and a collection of oral tales.” Herodotus regularly mentions

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5 Ibid., 67-69.
6 Ibid., 65.
having heard of an event or about a person, but does not divulge his sources. Many of his stories are likely based simply on hearsay and local lore. This is typical of ancient historians, who often concerned themselves more with teaching moral lessons than a factual accounting of events.\textsuperscript{7} As a result, the \textit{Histories} is likely full of fictitious speeches, exaggerated (if not wholly inaccurate) numbers of troops, and unreliable tales.

A well-known example of Herodotus’ gift for compelling, yet likely fictitious, dialog in his narration is the exchange between Dieneces the Spartan and a Persian ambassador. The ambassador tells Dieneces that the Persian arrows will block the sun with their great numbers. Dieneces replied, “If the Medes hide the sun, we shall be fighting in the shade instead of the sunshine.”\textsuperscript{8} Certainly, it is impossible for Herodotus to have known the exact words exchanged on the battlefield, so he uses the bold words of Dieneces to show the extraordinary valor of the Spartans against insurmountable odds, a key component of Spartan militaristic culture. This, as Peter Krentz points out, provides an example of the Persian reliance on their archers and the fierceness of the Spartan hoplites.\textsuperscript{9} Therefore, not only is the dialog important to military historians, but also to cultural historians.

Because the \textit{Histories} is the oldest extant account of the Persian Wars, historians can learn much about Greek military strategy from it. One example involves a discussion between Mardonius and Xerxes in which Mardonius refers to the Greeks as “reckless” and “clumsy,” and mocks the Greek’s “ill-contrived” method of fighting on flat ground.\textsuperscript{10} Everett Wheeler and

\begin{footnotes}
\item[\textsuperscript{7}] Ibid., 64.
\item[\textsuperscript{10}] Hdt. 7.9.
\end{footnotes}
Barry Strauss claim that such a conversation “cannot be historical.” They contend that Herodotus used the conversation as “satirical critique” about open battle.\textsuperscript{11} Historians have used this dialog to indicate a shift in tactics from Homeric warfare. According to Krentz, “Homeric warriors happily deceived their enemies,” yet Herodotus’ use of dialog between Mardonius and Xerxes indicates that the Greeks used “open battles when both sides were ready.”\textsuperscript{12} This face-to-face and open use of force is, according to Wheeler and Strauss, known as the “Achilles ethos.” The opposite style of warfare, the “Odysseus ethos,” uses trickery, deceit, and avoidance of face-to-face battles.\textsuperscript{13} It is uncertain here whether Herodotus was taking the moral high ground by advocating the “Achilles ethos” or if he simply reported what his sources wrote about the battle and Greek battlefield tactics in general. Regardless, Herodotus provides an analysis of Greek battle that modern historians would not otherwise have, despite some probable inaccuracies and moral posturing.

There is little doubt that historians must examine the exact details of Herodotus’ battle accounts with skepticism. For example, Herodotus estimates the number of men from Asia in Xerxes’ fighting force at 2,641,610.\textsuperscript{14} Adding the support staff, the number swells to 5,283,220.\textsuperscript{15} Clearly, this is an exceptionally large number of men, and the number is almost certainly overinflated. It is uncertain whether Herodotus exaggerated the numbers himself to create a David and Goliath scenario between the smaller Greek force and the colossal Persian force, or whether the numbers were mistranslated or transposed by medieval monks.\textsuperscript{16} If the former was the case, Herodotus may have used the number of troops to promote Greek bravery and

\textsuperscript{12} Krentz, 28.
\textsuperscript{13} Wheeler and Strauss, 188.
\textsuperscript{14} Hdt. 7.185.
\textsuperscript{15} Hdt. 7.186.
\textsuperscript{16} Gabriel, 65.
determination, a testament to his positive view of Greek culture and military prowess despite numerical inferiority.

Herodotus often uses stories to show Greek, specifically Athenian, culture in a positive light. Regarding the death of Cleomenes of Sparta, for example, Herodotus explains three reasons why Cleomenes went mad and mutilated himself. According to the Greeks in general, as Herodotus relates, Cleomenes had received divine retribution because he “bribed the Priestess to pronounce against Demaratus.” The Athenians, however, believed that Cleomenes was punished for destroying the “sacred precinct” of the goddesses Demeter and Persephone while invading Eleusis. The Spartans had their own opinion on the matter, contending that Cleomenes went mad because of his Scythian habit of drinking wine not mixed with water. Herodotus takes sides in this dispute stating, “For my own part, I think Cleomenes’ death was a punishment for what he did to Demaratus.” In this instance, Herodotus interjects his own opinion, deciding which version of accounts he thinks most plausible and reaffirming his faith in and respect for the value of religion in Greek society. Furthermore, he identifies the custom of mixing diluting wine with water, a practice the Greeks that was thought to be a mark of civilization.

Herodotus also uses dialog to promote Athenian democratic ideology over the ideology of its rivals, particularly Sparta and Persia. According to Sara Forsdyke, “Herodotus uses Croesus’ inquiry [of Athens and Sparta against the Persians] as an excuse for a digression on

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17 Hdt. 6.75.
18 Ibid.
19 Hdt. 6.84.
20 Ibid.
22 Hdt. 1.59.
Athenian history and particularly on how the tyrant Peisistratus came to power in Athens.”  

Herodotus, according to Forsdyke, is attempting to build a relationship “between tyranny and civic weakness and the antithetical relation between democratic freedom and civic strength.” Clearly, in this case Herodotus throws out neutrality and takes sides with Athens, which he favors as having a government superior to those of monarchical Sparta or Persia. Herodotus, commenting on the power hungriness of Cambyses and his abuses of power, states, “Absolute power ought to render a man free from jealousy, possessing as he does all that he could wish for, but the opposite proves to be the case in respect of this conduct toward his subjects.”

Herodotus’ use of dialog, while almost certainly fictitious, provides modern historians an understanding of the political climate in which Herodotus lived and the growing power of Athens in the dawn of the Peloponnesian War with Sparta.

As has been shown, the *Histories* of Herodotus is an influential work of historical writing. While its many speeches may have been contrived by Herodotus to further his own beliefs, the *Histories* remains valuable from both a military and a cultural perspective. Herodotus’ descriptions of Greek and Persian warfare, while perhaps not entirely accurate by modern historical standards, are the oldest extant detailed accounts of Classical Greek battle tactics. For that reason alone, the *Histories* is a valuable source for the military historian. In addition, the numerous stories and descriptions of events offer modern historians a unique glimpse of Greek, Persian, Egyptian, Scythian, and other cultures. For these reasons, the *Histories* is valuable to modern historians as a source for both military and cultural history.

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24 Ibid., 334.
25 Hdt. 3.80.
Bibliography


