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HERODOTUS¹

By G.E.M. DE STE. CROIX

History as we know it (I mean historiography, the writing of history) may in a very real sense be said to have been invented by the Greeks, and it was a creation of the fifth century B.C. The earliest historian whose works we possess—indeed, the earliest of all historians in the proper sense—is Herodotus of Halicarnassus, who wrote during the third quarter of the fifth century; and the greatest of all Greek historians, Thucydides the Athenian, wrote in the next generation, roughly in the last thirty years of the fifth century.

Herodotus and Thucydides are the earliest Greek historians whose works have survived in anything but small fragments. Indeed for us they are the first historians, in the proper sense, in any language at all. They represent something entirely new, a new kind of activity, essentially (at least as far as Thucydides is concerned) the same kind of activity as that which historians of to-day pursue, but unlike that practised by any earlier peoples. Few modern readers of the great Greek historians realize how astonishingly original they were. We speak of the 'originality' of Bach and Beethoven, of Shakespeare, of Euripides and Aristophanes, all of whom worked within a tradition that was already established, although of course they greatly developed it and infused into it new qualities peculiar to themselves. Herodotus and Thucydides were original not only in that sense but also in another: they were innovators, creating a new form of intellectual activity. If we want to understand the full significance of the achievement of Herodotus and Thucydides, we must see this, I suggest, as part of the beginnings of scientific method, of that wonderful movement of enlightenment, of proto-scientific thinking (if I may call it that), which took place in the sixth, fifth, and fourth centuries; and the first thing I want to do is to set the rise of historiography within that general framework, to present it as part of the whole movement of thought, part of the beginnings of scientific thinking.

This is best brought out, I think, by reflecting for a moment on the Greek word for History: *historia*, with its verb *historein*. Although these words are occasionally used almost from the first in our sense of 'history', they occur far more often with a much broader meaning, covering a far wider range of activities: inquiry,

observation, research, whether into events, or into the facts of biology or the principles of mathematics or the nature of things, or what you will. Our expression 'Natural History' preserves the Greek (and the Latin) usage; cf. Theophrastus' *Peri Phytōn Historia* (in Latin, *Historia Plantarum*): this title should really be translated 'Inquiry into Plants'.

It was something entirely new in human history when, in the sixth and fifth centuries B.C., men began systematically to pursue *historia* in this sense: the investigation, enthusiastic yet dispassionate, of events, of material objects and processes, of human behaviour and institutions, of diseases, of the movements of heavenly bodies, and of the laws governing these things, for their own sake—or, as I would prefer to put it, for their relevance to man. There were of course fundamental weaknesses in Greek *historia*: in particular, the experimental method was largely neglected, and the techniques of observation and measurement were still in a rudimentary stage. At its worst, this sort of thing might be no more than immature physics, futile cosmology, or bad philosophy; but at its best Greek *historia* represented the very real beginnings of Science. And I think it is found at its best in the mathematicians, the medical writers, and the historians, above all Herodotus and, even more, Thucydides. Too little attention has been paid in recent times to Greek historiography as part of the beginnings of scientific method. And yet it seems obvious to me that there is no field of intellectual activity in the fifth century in which there is a narrower gulf between the best achievement of that period and the work produced in our own day than in historiography, at any rate in so far as its subject-matter was contemporary events or the recent past, as in nearly all of Thucydides: in dealing with more remote times, of course, the Greek historians were greatly inferior to their modern counterparts, above all because the necessary techniques of dealing with ancient evidence had not yet been evolved.

One of the most fascinating passages in all Greek literature, for me, is the fragment of Euripides preserved by the early Christian writer, Clement of Alexandria, in praise of the man who practises *historia*.² (Euripides, of course, is said to have been the friend and pupil of Anaxagoras, a member of the Periclean circle and one of the most interesting of the early Greek intellectuals.) 'Happy is the man who possesses the knowledge that comes from *historia*. He does not devise calamities for the citizens, or commit injustice, but surveys the ageless order of immortal Nature, what it is, and how, and why. Never can such men as this practise base deeds.'

Historia here may stand more for cosmological theorizing and rather rudimentary astronomy than for what we should call history or natural science; but all these activities were far less sharply differentiated then than they are now, in our over-specialized age; and they were felt to be of the same order, as indeed they were, compared with earlier ways of thinking.

Earlier ways of thinking—if we are to appreciate the enormous advance in human thought represented by Greek historiography, we must compare the Greek historians with men of earlier societies who tried to write about the past. At once we find ourselves in the presence of material of an entirely different order. Before the fifth century we have no ‘history’ (no historiography) in our sense, but one or both of two things: either poetry (often containing myth and legend), or else propaganda, royal, racial, or religious: in either case, raw material for history, rather than actual history, because its purpose is not to record things (even selectively) as they happened, but just to produce a good story, or to glorify some god, king, hero, or people, and to vilify his or their adversaries. In the pre-Classical Near East, in Mesopotamia and Egypt, the nearest things to history are the Assyrian royal annals, and the Egyptian inscriptions recording the exploits of the Pharaohs. But very much the best of pre-Greek writings in the historical field are the historical books of the Old Testament, especially Judges, the two Books of Samuel, and above all the two Books of Kings. Unfortunately, these appear to be read nowadays by most people almost entirely for their edificatory value; only a small proportion of those who read them seem to be aware that they are fascinating historical sources, often imbued with great dramatic power and intensity. For sheer force and vividness I know of few narratives to equal those of the last two chapters of First Kings: the story of Naboth’s vineyard and of the death of Ahab. But these historical works are not really straight history; they are the raw material for history, essentially propaganda (and highly poetic propaganda), written mainly in order to expound and drive home a particular set of religious and ethical beliefs. King Ahab ‘did evil in the sight of the Lord’; and in the prophetic tradition which inspires the Books of Samuel and Kings there is no nonsense about impartiality—so we are told nothing whatever there about the great battle of Karkar in 853, recorded only in the Assyrian Royal Annals of Shalmaneser III.³ In this battle, Ahab played an important part in an anti-Assyrian alliance, and apparently a very successful part, because although Shalmaneser, as always, claims a victory, the circumstantial evidence against

this verdict is so strong that many historians now see the battle as a distinct check to Assyrian expansion. We need not be surprised, therefore, to find no mention of this event, so creditable to the wicked Ahab, in the Book of Kings, although it must have been much the most important event in his reign.

I am not suggesting that Greek historians were never guilty of similar suppressions of the truth. But the best of them are capable of a much higher degree of objectivity than we find in the Israelite or any other early chronicles. The Greeks had realized—some of them had realized—that knowing how a thing came to be what it is, and studying it in that light, for its own sake, as objectively as possible, may help one to understand it and learn how best to deal with it. This is an essential part of the scientific attitude.

The Greeks, coming into contact through their commerce and colonization with many other peoples, all having different beliefs and institutions, began to realize—some of them began to realize—that the *nomoi*, the manners and customs and ideas and laws (the ‘way of life’, if you like) handed down to one by one’s own ancestors are not necessarily the best of all possible ways of life, and that even if one eventually concludes they are, that is no reason for disregarding the ideas and institutions of other peoples, or regarding them with disgust or contempt. The perfect illustration of this is the little story told by Herodotus (3.38) to give point to his observation that everyone naturally prefers his own ancestral institutions, his own *nomoi*. (The tale was certainly made up by some other Greek.) King Darius of Persia, says Herodotus, asked some Greeks for how much money they would be prepared to eat their fathers’ dead bodies. The Greeks, who of course burnt their dead, declared that nothing would induce them to do such a thing. Darius then turned to certain Indians called Kallataiai, who were accustomed to eat their dead, and asked them what they would take to burn the bodies of their fathers: they begged him not even to speak of such a horror. What is remarkable about this story is that it holds the scales evenly between Greeks and *barbaroi*: the moral which Herodotus proceeds to draw is not that there are non-Greeks who are disgusting enough to eat their dead, but that everyone will naturally prefer the customs in which he himself was brought up, however queer they may seem to other people. Just imagine how differently the authors of First and Second Kings would have treated such a story, if they had been telling it of the Israelites and the Philistines or the Phoenicians. What, eat your dead? Well, doesn’t that just show that if you begin by worshipping Dagon or Baal instead of Yahweh, you end up

with cannibalism?

Similarly, Herodotus elsewhere gives us a little trilogy of speeches presenting the case for democracy (called here *isonomīē*), oligarchy, and monarchy, in turn (3.80–2). Here we have the earliest surviving discussion in any language of the rival merits of different forms of constitution, with the case for each presented quite competently, something that is unthinkable in any pre-Greek society. Here again we have the best kind of Greek thought: the willingness to regard even fundamental questions of politics as open to discussion. (Herodotus, incidentally, believed that this debate actually took place just before the accession of Darius to the Persian throne, in 521, and that the speeches were delivered by three noble Persians—an absurd supposition, of course, because the speeches are purely Greek in conception, as virtually everyone now realizes.)

Now this little dialogue, the ‘Persian Debate’, as it is often called, brings out admirably one of the two really fundamental innovations in human thinking which should be attributed to the Greeks, the two great innovations in method which, I believe, were primarily responsible for the fact that Greek science, unlike anything we know among the Egyptians and Babylonians and others, is recognizably like modern science. The innovation which is illustrated by Herodotus’ Persian Debate is the habit of reducing problems to their simplest terms, of looking for explanations which account for the largest possible number of phenomena. Thus when Eudoxus, the great mathematician and astronomer of the fourth century, produced the first geometrical account of the movements of all the known heavenly bodies, he conceived it entirely in terms of a combination of perfect spheres. And so Herodotus’ source, the composer of the Persian Debate, confronted with competing forms of political organization, began by reducing the problem to its basic elements: a State may be ruled by one man, by some, or by all—and this division is exhaustive: one may later subdivide, by distinguishing, for example, hereditary monarchy from tyranny, or aristocracy of birth from oligarchy based on wealth; but the three primary forms are the basic ones, which must include all examples. And then one can proceed, as the Debate does, on the basis of actual experience, to discuss what each form is like in practice.

The second of the two great Greek innovations I mentioned is their habit of exact and scrupulous observation: the accumulation of empirical evidence (evidence drawn from experience), in the belief that everything in the human environment is relevant to

man's life. Under this head fall not only the great collections of Hippocratic clinical case-histories; and the remarkable series of astronomical observations now lost to us, which made the great generalizations of the mathematical astronomers possible; but also the geographical writings of Hecataeus and Pytheas and their like; the historical, anthropological, and ethnographic material presented by Herodotus; and Thucydides' extraordinary detailed and precise account of the Peloponnesian War and its antecedents.

From now on I shall concentrate on Herodotus, the 'Father of History', as Cicero and many others have called him. Sometimes, to annoy friends and pupils who have what seems to me a too unqualified and intemperate enthusiasm for Herodotus, I like to say, 'Yes, Herodotus was certainly the Father of History—in the sense that history really began in the next generation, with Thucydides.' But you may think that rather a poor joke. Herodotus was certainly the first real historian, and incidentally the earliest anthropologist and ethnologist whose work survives. Of course he can sometimes be very silly, and retail absurd stories and inaccurate information. The friends I mentioned who suffer from the fashionable Herodotolatry do not care to be reminded that Aristotle, who quotes Herodotus over and over again in different contexts, refers to him once as *ho mythologos*, 'the story-teller'.⁴ Perhaps it is worth mentioning one of the contexts in which Aristotle is critical of Herodotus. He is recalling that according to Herodotus the semen of Ethiopians is black. 'No it isn't,' says Aristotle.⁵ One cannot help suspecting that Aristotle had verified this, as Herodotus evidently had not. And perhaps I should also mention the remark of Gibbon, who seems to me to hit the nail on the head very nicely, as always, when he says that Herodotus 'sometimes writes for children and sometimes for philosophers'. But there is also real truth in the judgement of Collingwood, who called Herodotus 'one of the great innovating geniuses of the fifth century'.

The 'Father of History' was not without predecessors of a sort: the so-called 'logographers' (*logographoi* or *logopoioi*); but most of them are hardly more than names to us, and in no case do the surviving fragments justify us in speaking of a 'historian'. Perhaps the most impressive is Hecataeus of Miletus, referred to several times by Herodotus, who calls him a *logopoios*:⁶ he was a statesman and man of affairs, and he wrote, among other things, a *Periēgēsis* or *Periodos Gēs*, describing the areas around the Mediterranean coasts and their peoples. Hecataeus may well be the Father of Geography and even of Ethnography. But I propose to say no more about him or the other logographers.

I cannot conceal the fact that I myself put Thucydides far above Herodotus as a historian. Among other things, Thucydides felt it was his duty, when confronted with conflicting evidence, to go into the evidence and sort it out and decide which account was right, whereas Herodotus too often just gives us different accounts that he had received and leaves it to us to decide. In a much quoted passage Herodotus says, 'I consider it is my task to report what is told me (*legein ta legomena*); but I'm not at all bound to believe it—and you can take this as applying to the whole of my History' (7. 152.3); and he says something of the same sort in two other passages (2. 123.1; 4. 195.2). Sometimes Herodotus' strict adherence to the principle of *legein ta legomena* can have peculiar results, as when he repeats the story (9.74) that the Athenian Sophanes was said by some to carry an iron anchor into battle, and cast it when he came near the enemy, so that he would not be tempted to try and run away; but when the enemy fled, he drew up his anchor and pursued them—in a somewhat laboured manner, one cannot help thinking. Herodotus does mention another version of this story (obviously the origin of the legend): that the anchor was merely a device pictured on Sophanes' shield; but he expresses no preference between the two versions. Certainly on some occasions we are glad to find him reporting a story in which he has no particular confidence or which he even rejects (and which Thucydides would surely not have included): sometimes, for example, it may give us a useful idea of contemporary propaganda which, however false, is important and revealing. A good example is an Athenian slander about alleged Corinthian cowardice at the battle of Salamis (8. 94). Another fascinating example is the story that about 600 B.C., at the instigation of Pharaoh Necho, some Phoenician mariners had sailed right around the continent of Africa, clockwise from the north-east, taking two to three years over the voyage (4. 42.2–4). According to Herodotus these Phoenicians declared that in circumnavigating Africa they had 'had the sun on their right hand'. This made Herodotus disbelieve the whole story. In fact the one thing that made him reject it is the one thing that tells most strongly in its favour, for it is only in the southern hemisphere that the sun could have appeared to be 'on their right' as the Phoenicians sailed south-west, west, and north-west around the Cape, and so they must have gone well south of the Equator.

Perhaps the most important of all the passages in which Herodotus describes his own method of work (which he only does incidentally) are 2. 99.1 and 2. 29.1. He had travelled widely in

Egypt, as far as the ancient Elephantine, the modern Assuan, near the first Cataract. What these two passages taken together tell us is that Herodotus actually ‘went and saw for himself’ (*autoptēs elthōn*) everything he had written about as far as Elephantine. He saw (that is *opsis*, seeing); he used his own judgement (that is *gnōmē*), and he did research (*historiē*), by looking at the monuments, cross-examining witnesses, and so forth. Beyond that point, he says, he has had to rely on *akoē*, report or hearsay, but he will add the evidence of his own eyes wherever he can. This is splendid. It is only too easy for us to take this sort of thing for granted; but in Herodotus’ day it took a very considerable feat of understanding to realize that *akoē* (hearsay) was greatly inferior, as evidence, to *opsis*, *gnōmē*, and *historiē*, going there for yourself and using your own eyes and your own judgement, and doing active research as well.

And once, on one of the few occasions on which he can be directly compared with Thucydides, Herodotus certainly comes off the better of the two: Thucydides (1.128.7) gives the text of an alleged letter from Pausanias to Xerxes which most people nowadays, I think, would take to be a forgery, and makes Pausanias speak of marrying Xerxes’ daughter, whereas in Herodotus it is only the daughter of Megabates, a relative of the King’s, and Herodotus adds, ‘if indeed the story is true’ (5.32).

Herodotus must have been born at some time in the 480s (perhaps about 484), and he certainly survived into the twenties of the fifth century; his History must have been written mainly in the third quarter of that century. It is a highly organized work, of quite extraordinary literary quality—we can be specially grateful for that, because it was Herodotus’ literary qualities above all, rather than his value as a historian, which led to his work being preserved whole. He was born at the Dorian colony of Halicarnassus, on the south-west coast of Asia Minor (Bodrum in modern Turkey), nearly opposite the island of Cos; and he belonged to a leading family there: his relative (perhaps his uncle), the epic poet Panyassis, may be the man of that name mentioned in a mid-fifth-century inscription from Halicarnassus⁷ which also mentions the tyrant Lygdamis, expelled shortly afterwards. The ancient tradition concerning Herodotus, which may well be correct, has him driven into exile for opposing Lygdamis and later returning to help drive out the tyrant. This is quite believable, and it would help to account for the fact that Herodotus shows at many points in his work a strong disapproval of the Greek form of dictatorship which the Greeks called *tyrannis* and we usually call ‘tyranny’.⁸

Herodotus often displays a tendency to divide political regimes into two broad classes: on the one hand one-man-rule, *monarchia*, which in practice would be either *basileia*, traditional kingship (as in Persia), or the usurped form of personal power which was the essence of the *tyrannis*, and on the other hand some form of responsible, constitutional government, whether by a hereditary aristocracy, or an oligarchy of wealth, or a democracy, but in any event ruling according to law and proper constitutional forms. Perhaps the best illustration of this contrast is the conversation between King Xerxes and the exiled Spartan King Demaratus:⁹ I know of nothing that brings out better the virtues which Herodotus saw, and rightly, in the unique political development which Greece had gone through by the fifth century.

Herodotus travelled extensively. He probably spent a good deal of time at Athens, now on the way to becoming the intellectual centre of the Greek world, and he certainly became a citizen of Thurii, the Greek colony in southern Italy, founded in the 440s B.C., though whether he was there at its original foundation or rather later, we do not know. The most extraordinarily varied opinions have been advanced about the date and method of writing of his great History, a subject on which, in my opinion, nothing is certain except that he certainly revised it down to the early 420s, for it explicitly refers to events early in the Peloponnesian War, which began in 431. Most people nowadays believe, as I do, that the History must have been completed by about 425; but some would put the date rather later. Some scholars have believed that Herodotus originally planned a geographical and ethnographic work, parts of which have survived in the History as we have it, notably Book 2 on Egypt; and there have been numerous contradictory theories about the order in which the various books were written. I am going to put all this on one side, as the arguments tend to be super-subtle and are difficult to follow and for the most part highly subjective.

Instead of trying to give a general impression of various aspects of the History, I am going to concentrate on just one subject, which is central in Herodotus: his religious outlook. In particular, I shall try to elucidate the question how far Herodotus' religious views affected his conception of historical causation and motivation. I shall place particular stress on a passage near the beginning of Book 7, describing Xerxes' Dream, which brings out better than anything else, to my mind, the way in which Herodotus' mind can move, as it were, on two quite different levels simultaneously, the human and the superhuman.

The first thing to be said about Herodotus' religious outlook is that it is not at all consistent: within it there coexist several strands of religious thought which are not really compatible, and Herodotus will sometimes jump from one to another, without realizing what he is doing. Adopting a classification applied in rather a different way by Mr. George Forrest, I shall begin by singling out three basic elements in the thought of Herodotus about causality, human responsibility, morality, the gods, fate, and so forth. One is moral; one, according to our way of thinking, is immoral; and one is amoral.

First, the moral element. At several points Herodotus takes it for granted that crimes, or at any rate great crimes, are suitably punished: sometimes he attributes this specifically to the gods; sometimes he just speaks of retribution or vengeance in the abstract (*tisis* or *mēnis*).¹⁰ I make the qualification 'great crimes' because all the examples I can remember relate either to important people or to particularly nasty crimes. I do not think we can decide whether for Herodotus the gods were interested in the ordinary misdeeds of you and me; but there is no doubt that he often conceives them as concerned to punish the crimes of 'Top People'. And particularly revolting crimes might attract the attention of the gods if committed by anyone. There is the story of Panionius of Chios, a mere slave-dealer who went in for atrocious deeds (*erga anosiotata*): he castrated Greek boys and sold them to the Persians to serve as eunuchs (8.105–6, esp. 106.3). One of his victims, Hermotimus, retaliated in kind against Panionius and his four sons; but Herodotus, making Hermotimus attribute his ability to exact vengeance to the justice of the gods, reserves his disapproval for Panionius and says not a word in condemnation of Hermotimus for his terrible revenge. 'Thus', he concludes, 'did retribution (*tisis*) and Hermotimus overtake Panionius.'

In a few passages Herodotus speaks of something happening by divine ordinance, or with divine help, usually with the implication that the gods are fulfilling, or some god is fulfilling, some good purpose.¹¹ Some of these texts, which use expressions like *theiēi tychēi*, *theiēi pompēi*, may be no more than conventional expressions, like the English 'God willing'; but there is one in particular (3.108.2 ff.) in which Herodotus speaks of 'divine providence', the *pronoïē* of *to theion* (the abstract neuter form: 'the divine', rare in Herodotus), which he describes as 'wise' (*sophē*). Among various illustrations of this providence is the fact that the female flying serpents of Arabia kill the male in the very act of mating, but that their offspring then eat their way out of their mother,

who in this way ‘makes retribution (*tisis*) to the male’ (3.109.2).

At the other extreme is the second of my three elements in Herodotus’ religious scheme of things: one which I can only call ‘immoral’ by our standards, although such a judgement would have been hardly intelligible to most Greeks. I refer to the notion of the jealousy of the gods, their resentment at any extraordinary prosperity on the part of a mortal. This is something quite different from the ‘jealousy of Yahweh’ in the Old Testament, which is directed entirely against the worship or acknowledgement of other gods. This motif plays hardly any role in Homer, although there are traces of it in the *Odyssey*.¹² In Herodotus it is sometimes given some sort of moral flavour: for example, in one passage Herodotus says that ‘a great *nemesis* from a god came upon Croesus, because, I suppose (*hōs eikasai*), he thought himself the most prosperous of men’ (1.34.1; cf. 1.45.2)—a kind of *hybris*, if you like. But we should not exaggerate the moral element here and pay too much attention to Croesus’ alleged pride, if only because the victim in this particular context was not Croesus himself but his son Atys. Later Herodotus shows that he regarded the fate of Croesus himself as already preordained by Fate¹³—I shall come back to this in a moment, under my third heading. As a rule, when we encounter the jealousy of the gods, there is no pretence of morality.¹⁴ In a characteristic passage Herodotus makes Solon say to Croesus, ‘I understand the divine (*to theion*): it is altogether jealous and troublesome (*pan eon phthoneron te kai tarachōdes*)’—a statement, incidentally, which greatly shocked the pious Plutarch 500 years later.¹⁵ In a rather stupid anti-Herodotean pamphlet, usually known by its Latin title, *De malignitate Herodoti*, Plutarch speaks very severely about this passage as libellous and malicious against the gods. And Solon goes on, in Herodotus, to tell Croesus that ‘Man is altogether chance’, *symphorē* (1.32.4). What Herodotus means by *symphorē* in such a context comes out clearly in a later passage, in which he makes Xerxes say that ‘Men don’t control *symphorai* [‘circumstances’, if you like] but are controlled by them’ (7.49.3). Men are largely at the mercy of outside powers.

This fact of human life, as it appeared to Herodotus, that man is dominated by powers and circumstances beyond his control, is very much in evidence in the third element in Herodotus’ religious thought which I said I would mention: this time neither a moral nor an immoral force, but essentially an amoral one, although once or twice it may happen to have a moral character. This is best described by the word Fate. Rarely is there any suggestion (as in 9.16.4) that what happens has been planned by a god; we commonly

hear only of *moira*, *tisis*, *to peprōmenon*, *to mellon genesthai*, or we find some such verb as *chrēn* or *dein*.¹⁶

But before I talk about these passages I want to issue a warning. It would be a very serious mistake to suppose that Herodotus habitually thought of man as the helpless prisoner of Fate or of circumstances or of divine purposes (or machinations). As we shall see, Herodotean man does to a considerable extent make his own destiny, by his own choice. He is certainly very far from being a completely free agent, and he lives in a rather terrifying universe, in which he may be struck down suddenly, even without any fault on his own part, simply because his excessive good fortune has attracted the malevolent attention of some god, or because he is being punished for a crime committed by some ancestor of his, or simply because that is how things are, that is his destiny, his lot, his *moira*, sometimes described as *hē peprōmenē moira*: that which has been allotted to him.

Now I think this is perhaps the most important of my three elements, both because there are certainly more examples of it in Herodotus than of either of my other two and because for Herodotus it takes first place—at least, when he thinks about it: one of the main points I have been trying to make is that Herodotus jumps from one of these three positions to another, surely without realizing that that is what he is doing. But when he does talk about Fate, it is never subordinated to anything else. The most important passage is the enormously interesting one about Croesus and Delphi.¹⁷ Croesus had gone to war with Cyrus and the Persians (with a basically defensive aim, incidentally), and he had done so on the strength of an ambiguous oracle from Delphi, to the effect that if he crossed the Halys he would ‘destroy a mighty empire’: he interpreted this to mean the Persian empire. When he had been utterly defeated and taken prisoner by Cyrus, he reproached the oracle for misleading him, only to receive the reply that it was his own fault for assuming that the empire which was going to be destroyed was the Persian one rather than his own. But it is the rest of Apollo’s reply which is the really interesting part. This falls into three sections. First, the Pythia said to Croesus that it was impossible even for a god to escape the appointed lot (*tēn peprōmenēn moiran*). Secondly, she told him that he was now expiating the crime of his ancestor in the fifth generation: Gyges’ murder of King Candaules, one of Herodotus’ most supremely entertaining stories.¹⁸ And the third thing the Pythia said to Croesus is the most interesting of all: that Apollo would have been only too glad to have the fated calamity fall upon Croesus’

descendants rather than upon Croesus himself (because Croesus had been most respectful to Apollo and had made rich gifts to him), but the god had been unable to divert the Fates (the Moirai); he did get the fall of Sardis postponed for three years, but he could obtain no greater concession than that. This is the only time in Herodotus that we find 'the Moirai' personified and in the plural. I like to speculate on how we are intended to conceive Apollo's solicitation of the Moirai as taking place. I must say, I cannot help seeing the situation rather in terms of the wonderful opening scene in *Die Götterdämmerung*, where the Norns (the Germanic equivalent of the Greek Moirai), in a very dim light, appear to the spectator to be playing some kind of round game with ropes—in fact they are weaving the web of life. And Apollo, I suppose, goes in to the Moirai rather apologetically, as Wotan might have dropped in on the Norns (though in fact he does not), and says, 'Look here, can't you let my pal Croesus off and have the vengeance for Candaulus strike down a son or grandson? He has really behaved very well towards me, and I would like to do him a good turn.' And the Moirai say, 'No, we won't do that.' So Apollo says, 'Well then, at least give him a few extra years, for my sake'; and in the end they say, 'Well, all right, we'll give him three years more; but that's your lot.'

Just what a *peprōmenē moira* was, and by what machinery it worked, or for that matter how the Moirai operated, and on what principles, and how they made their decisions prevail, I do not suppose Herodotus or any other pious Greek cared to think out to the very bottom. Some people today may smile in a superior way and say they have no truck with any such superstitious notions. But have you yourself ever prayed to the Virgin or some saint, or for that matter the Saviour himself, to intercede for you with the Almighty, in the way that Apollo tried to intercede with the Moirai for Croesus? If so, perhaps you will be able to get a little closer than I can to understanding the mind of Herodotus, who was a deeply religious man.

As in his acceptance of the jealousy of the gods, so in his beliefs about Fate, Herodotus is characteristically a Greek of the days before the Enlightenment. Both these elements in his thought have embarrassed some of his greatest admirers. Mr. Forrest does touch lightly on the first (the jealousy of the gods), but he does not even mention the second (his commitment to a belief in the supremacy of Fate), although it is not really very discreditable to Herodotus, since it was a position that was held by very many Greeks, even intellectuals, right down to the end of Classical

Antiquity. (Later on it was greatly reinforced by the pseudo-science of astrology.) And of course it can be seen very early, in Homer. In *Iliad* 16.431–58 we have a conversation between Zeus and Hera about the fate of Sarpedon, a son of Zeus, whom the god very much wanted to save, but who was known to be fated to die at the hands of Patroclus. The implication, I think, is that Zeus could have overridden the decrees of Fate had he dared to do so; but he realizes that this simply will not do. And in *Iliad* 22.209–13, when he wants to discover whether Achilles or Hector is going to win, he holds up the golden scales to find out; and the lot of Hector sinks down into the realm of Hades, whereupon Apollo deserts him, realizing that now he is finished.

But now I want to strike a very different note. So far we have seen the gods deciding human destinies, whether for good motives (generally punishing crimes) or bad (their own jealousy); and we have seen that even they are subject to the supreme decrees of Fate or the Fates. But within the limits set by the gods and Fate and so forth, Herodotus' men do have a very wide power of deciding their own destinies. This comes out best in a splendid passage, which is often quoted as demonstrating that in Herodotus men are anything but free agents. I refer to the Dream of Xerxes.¹⁹ If I had to recommend one single passage to illustrate Herodotus' religious outlook, it would have to be this.

The story is easily told. King Xerxes, in the late 480s, holds a conference of his great men and tells them that he wants to take vengeance on the Athenians for the damage they did to the Persians in the Ionian Revolt, in the early 490s. He asks them to give their opinions. Mardonius speaks for, and Xerxes' uncle Artabanus against, an attack on Greece. Xerxes is indignant with Artabanus and makes it clear that nothing will divert him from his expressed intention of invading and conquering all Greece. But later Xerxes, 'giving counsel to the night', as Herodotus puts it ('taking counsel of the night', as we might say), changed his mind and decided not to invade Greece. And then comes the Dream, which urges him to persevere in his original intention. Xerxes takes no notice of the Dream, summons his Persians, and tells them it is all off, and they are very pleased. And then, that very night, the same Dream comes to Xerxes again. As we shall see, it is no such dream as you and I are accustomed to, a product of our own unconscious minds, but a real objective entity in its own right, exactly like the famous Dream sent to Agamemnon in the *Iliad* (2.5–40), except that we are told in that case that the Dream was sent by Zeus. Well, it comes again to Xerxes, and this time it threatens disaster to him

personally if he does not carry out his plan to attack Greece. Xerxes jumps up and sends for Artabanus, and asks his advice. Artabanus is very sensible and avuncular: he addresses the King as 'My boy' (*O pai*) and says, 'Not to worry. This isn't anything to do with the gods (*oude tauta esti theia*). I'm a lot older than you and I can assure you that the things that come to people in dreams are simply reflections of what they've been thinking about by day.' Admirably rational, you may say, if a bit patronizing. But Xerxes is not satisfied. 'If the dream is sent by a god', he says, 'then it ought to come to you too if you put on the royal robes and sit on the royal throne, and then go to sleep in the royal bed.' Artabanus does not like the idea of this much, but Xerxes insists and eventually he has to agree. And the Dream does come to him, and threatens to punish him too if he seeks to avert that which must come to pass (*to chreon genesthai*); and it makes as if to burn out his eyes with red-hot irons. At that he gets up and tells Xerxes that there is some supernatural purpose at work here (*a daimoniē tis . . . hormē*) and that some heaven-sent destruction (*phthorē tis . . . theēlatos*) is going to overtake the Greeks, and that what has happened is from God (*ek tou theou*).

Most people have taken the Dream sequence as evidence that Herodotus saw Xerxes' invasion of Greece as something ineluctably fated from the beginning. So in a sense it is. But what is often overlooked is that in the early chapters of Book 7, before the Dream sequence, Herodotus has given a perfectly good set of human motives for the great Persian expedition, which establish a completely satisfactory scheme of causation, without a trace of supernaturalism. The Dream merely *prevents Xerxes from changing his mind*. You can verify this for yourselves in detail by looking up the passages:²⁰ you can see at a glance what a wide range of motives is covered.

Here you can see Herodotus at work in a way that for once enables us to distinguish clearly between what I can best call his different levels of causation. In chapters 5–11 of Book 7 we remain throughout on an entirely human level. There are one or two references to the supernatural, but they are purely incidental.²¹ Then in chapter 12, after Xerxes has changed his mind, we find ourselves jumping suddenly to the supernatural level, on which Xerxes is persuaded to change his mind back again. I am not saying that only the human level matters, and not the supernatural: that would be absurd. But I would emphasize that Herodotus does provide a quite remarkably complete chain of causation and motivation on the human level first, before introducing the divine.

The Dream sequence is intended as an illustration of divine intervention, of course, because it is agreed between Xerxes and Artabanus that if Xerxes' dream reappears to Artabanus, it will be a proof that it has a divine origin. But I think we are entitled to see a difference between this passage, where the divine intervention merely stops a plan already conceived from being abandoned, and some others in Herodotus, or the famous passage in Aeschylus' *Persae* (lines 361–2), where the Messenger attributes Xerxes' fatal attack at Salamis to the guile of a Greek and the jealousy of the gods, working simultaneously.

Herodotus often jumps from the natural level of explanation to the supernatural, and vice versa. It is true that he sometimes fails to provide a satisfactory human explanation, because he has his ready-made supernatural one, that something was 'bound to happen', 'fated to happen'. But I can only think of one single occasion on which his obsession with the supernatural actually makes him distort the narrative of events. This is his account of the breaking off of the alliance between Polycrates, the tyrant of Samos, and Amasis, king of Egypt.²² Amasis became nervous, according to Herodotus, when he observed the extraordinary prosperity of his ally Polycrates. So he wrote to Polycrates, warning him that the divine is characterized by jealousy, and that he had never heard of anyone prosperous in all respects who did not come to a bad end—one of Herodotus' favourite hobby-horses, as we have seen. He advised Polycrates to throw away the most valuable thing he had, as an apotropaic rite to appease the gods. This introduces the famous story of the ring (which has parallels in the folk-lore of many countries): Polycrates throws it into the deep sea, only to have it return to him in the body of a fish brought to him by one of his subjects. And when Amasis heard of this, says Herodotus, he saw that Polycrates, because he could not help prospering in every way, would come to no good end. And he therefore sent a herald to Samos to break off the friendship. In fact it should have been obvious to Herodotus (especially in view of what he himself says in 3.44) that the breach came from the side of Polycrates, who realized that Cambyses, king of Persia, was planning an expedition against Egypt, which was very likely to succeed, and hastened to desert Amasis and make his submission to Cambyses in time, before he was left isolated.

Perhaps in conclusion I might suggest just one fascinating subject for you to think about while you are reading Herodotus, or indeed sixth- and fifth-century Greek literature in general. One of the great advances in human thinking and behaviour which have

occurred independently in many civilized societies is the growth of the belief that in general a man ought to be held responsible only for what he does himself, and that he should not be punished for the sins of his ancestors. Herodotus is about the last Greek writer I know who reverts again and again to the old belief that men might be made responsible, by the gods or Fate, for the misdeeds of their ancestors. He obviously saw nothing morally objectionable in such a position. Another fifth-century writer, born about forty years before Herodotus, makes great play with the ancestral curse, in which the notion of guilt transmitted by inheritance from father to son is vividly expressed: I refer, of course, to Aeschylus, whose Agamemnon falls a victim to the curse on the house of Atreus. But in Aeschylus there are two features which produce a significantly different and, to my mind, more acceptable picture. First, the chorus in the *Agamemnon* (lines 750 ff.), surely speaking for the poet himself, reject the doctrine that mere prosperity can of itself bring disaster: they refer to this as a widely accepted notion, and of course we have noticed it in Herodotus, under the form of divine jealousy. No, say the chorus emphatically, there must be some actual misdeed, *hybris* or the like. And the second difference in Aeschylus is that the ancestral curse does not come automatically upon Agamemnon, but only when he himself commits a crime, by sacrificing Iphigeneia—then (as the chorus put it) he fastens the harness of *anankē* upon himself (*Agamemnon* 218 ff.). His brother Menelaus is equally subject in principle to the curse, but he dies in his bed. It is a strange picture: the descendants of Atreus go about with the frightful menace of doom hanging over their heads, and if one of them does something really bad, then down comes the full weight of the curse on him. By the end of the fifth century, and subsequently, we do not encounter such ideas very often; naturally they linger longest in such highly traditional things as religious formulae: the imprecations that accompany oaths, for example, may still invoke destruction upon a man and his *genos* as late as the Roman period.

There is a most interesting parallel, which you might like to pursue some time, in Hebrew thought. In the earlier layers of the Old Testament it is taken for granted that a man's descendants (and often even his menservants and maidservants, sheep and oxen) will all be destroyed with him if he commits some serious crime. The stories of Achan, of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, and of the descendants of Ahab,²³ are to us among the most morally revolting of many unpleasant passages in the Old Testament. Even in the Decalogue, in Exodus 20:5, the iniquity of the fathers is

visited upon the children 'unto the third and fourth generation'. This is understandable, for the Israelites were a good deal closer than the Greeks of the Archaic Age to a situation not merely of clan solidarity but of the blood-feud itself. But from about the late seventh century onwards we find a rejection of the idea of punishment of children for the sins of their fathers; and a fine chapter in Ezekiel contains an explicit and emotional repudiation of the whole idea of joint family responsibility for crime.²⁴

By the late fifth century in the Greek world, the whole concept of punishment was being called in question, and purely retributive forms of justice, which still have a strong appeal today, even (and perhaps especially) among members of the English judiciary, were being rejected by progressive thinkers like Protagoras, who argued that punishment ought to be purely reformatory or deterrent. In Thucydides (3.45) there is even a most remarkable attack upon excessive reliance on punishment as a deterrent. But here too, it seems to me, Herodotus belongs to an older and less rational world.

NOTES

The text of Herodotus most used in this country is the Oxford one, by C. Hude (2 vols., 3rd edn., 1927 and repr.).

Translations: Perhaps the most accurate is by J. Enoch Powell (2 vols., Oxford, 1949), but the old English is atrocious. G. Rawlinson (2 vols., Everyman) and A.D. Godley (4 vols., Loeb) are more pleasing if less correct; more accurate than these two are G.C. Macaulay (2 vols., 1890) and A. de Selincourt (Penguin Classics).

Introductions etc: Probably the best short introduction is by W.G. Forrest, on pp. vii-xxxvi of his abridged edition of Rawlinson's translation in 'The Great Histories' (an American series, paperback and hardback, ed. H.R. Trevor-Roper, 1963 and repr.). J.L. Myres, *Herodotus, Father of History* (Oxford, 1953), is useful for the 'Tabular Analysis' on pp. 118-34. See also the article on Herodotus in the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* (2nd edn., 1970), with bibliography.

1. This very elementary paper was read to the J.A.C.T. Summer School in Greek at Cheltenham in two different years. At the editors' request it is printed here almost exactly in its original form, in the hope that it may be used in schools, or in universities with 'Classical Civilization' or similar courses, to awaken an interest in Herodotus (and in Greek historiography generally) among those who have not yet acquired a knowledge of the Greek language or of Greek literature.

2. Euripides, fr. 910 (in A. Nauck's standard *Tragicorum Graecorum Fragmenta*², 1889, repr. 1964).

3. See J.B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*³ (Princeton, 1969), pp. 278-9.

4. *Gen. An.* 3. 5. 756^b 6-7.

5. Hdt. 3. 101. 2 and Arist. *Gen. An.* 2. 2. 736^a 10-13 etc.

6. Hdt. 2. 143. 1 ff.; 5. 36. 2 ff. and 125; 6. 137. 1 ff.

7. R. Meiggs and D.M. Lewis, *A Selection of Greek Historical Inscriptions* (Oxford, 1969 and repr.), no. 32, with the commentary (pp. 71-2).

8. See A. Andrewes, *The Greek Tyrants* (London, 1956).

9. 7. 101-4, esp. 102. 1; 103. 4; 104. 4-5.

10. 1. 13. 2 (cf. 91. 1); 34. 1 (cf. 45. 2); 86. 6; 127. 2; 2. 120. 5; 3. 126. 1 and 128. 5; 4. 205; 6. 72; 84. 3; 7. 133-7 (esp. 134. 1; 137. 1-2); 8. 106. 3-4; 129. 3; 9. 64. 1; 65. 2; cf. 6. 91. 1.

11. 3. 108. 2; also 1. 126. 6; 3. 77. 1; 153. 2; 4. 8. 3; 152. 2; 5. 92 γ . 3; 7. 18. 3; 139. 5; 8. 13; 94. 2.
12. *Od.* 5. 118 ff.; cf. 4. 181–2; 8. 564–71; 13. 172–7; 23. 210–12. For *Iliad* 17. 71 etc., see E.R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley, 1951), pp. 30 and 51 n.9.
13. Contrast 1. 91. 1 (with 7–13, esp. 13. 2).
14. 1. 32. 1 (with *Plut. Mor.* 857f–8a = *De Malign. Herod.* 15); cf. 3. 40. 2–3 (with 42. 4 and 43. 1); 7. 10 ϵ ; also 1. 207. 2; 7. 46. 4; 203. 2. (In 8. 109. 3 Themistocles is supposed to be speaking deceitfully; see 109. 5; 110. 1.)
15. See the first passage in n.14 above.
16. 1. 8. 2; 91. 1; 121; 2. 161. 3; 3. 43. 1; 64. 4–5; 65. 3–4; 142. 5; 4.79. 1; 164. 4; 5. 33. 2; 92 δ . 1; 6. 64; 135. 3; 8. 53. 1; 9. 109. 2.
17. 1. 90–1, esp. 91. 1–3. (For the oracle, see 1. 53, esp. § 3. For Croesus' essentially defensive purpose, see 46. 1.) For 'Moirai' in the plural in Homer, see *Il.* 24. 49.
18. 1. 91. 1, with 1. 7–13 (esp. 13. 2).
19. Xerxes' Dream: 7. 5 ff., esp. 8–19. For the Dreams, see 12. 1–13. 1; 14. 1; 15. 1 ff. (esp. 17. 1–18. 1. 3–4).
- 20 (a) Vengeance, on Athens in particular: 7. 5. 2; 8 β . 1–3; 9. 2; 11. 2–4. (b) Get reputation and glory: 5. 2; 8a. 2. (c) Increase Persian empire: 5. 3; 8 γ . 1–2. (d) Ambition of Mardonius to be satrap: 5. 1 ff., esp. 6. 1. (e) Pressure from Aleuads: 6. 2 and 5. (f) Pressure from Peisistratids: 6. 2 and 5. (g) Onomacritus and his oracles: 6. 3–5. (h) Underestimation of Greeks: 9a. 1–2; β . 1–2, γ ; 11. 4.
21. 7. 6. 3–5 (the oracles); 8a. 1 (Xerxes claims divine guidance); 10 ϵ (Artabanus speaks in a very Herodotean way of divine jealousy).
22. 3. 39–43 (esp. 43); contrast 44. 1 ff.
23. For Achan (who took some of the forbidden spoil of Jericho), see *Josh.* 7, esp. verses 24–5. For Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, see *Num.* 16, esp. verses 23–33, 41–50. For Ahab and his descendants, see 1 *Kings* 21: 21–9 (esp. 28–9), with 2 *Kings* 9: 7–10 and 24–37.
24. See *Deut.* 24:16; 2 *Kings* 14:6; *Jerem.* 31: 29–30; and in particular *Ezek.* 18, esp. verses 2–3, 19–20.