

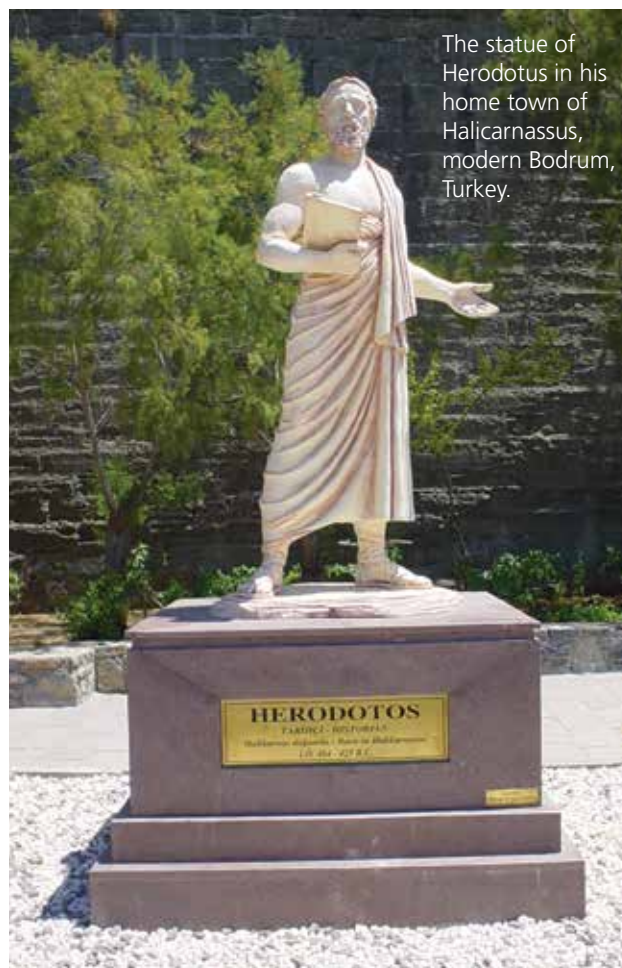
Dolgehronion

Father of History, Father of Lies, Father of Anthropology: Herodotus

Edith Hall

You can buy a cheap flight to Bodrum (south-west Turkey), now a popular package holiday tourist destination and in antiquity named Halicarnassus, and visit ancient Greek temples and a theatre dating back more than 2,000 years. In Bodrum's incomparable Underwater Archaeology Museum, you can admire the extraordinary Phoenician, Carian, Cypriot, Greek and Roman artefacts rescued by divers from the ancient shipwrecks which litter the seabed of the eastern Aegean. You can also pay homage at several statues of Herodotus (484-425 BCE), the city's most famous native, and the man whom Cicero called 'The Father of History'.¹ For we owe the very name of our subject and our discipline to the opening phrase of the nearly 200,000 words, in the Ionic dialect of classical Greek, constituting Herodotus' nine-book narrative of the Persian Wars: 'This is the publication of the investigation (*historiē*) by Herodotus of Halicarnassus.'

The classicist John Herington once called Herodotus a literary 'centaur', because from the front he looks like a rational intellectual, but his rear parts belong to a primitive creature of the wild.² Herodotus' pioneering prose treatise sought to explain the nature of the world he inhabited, in the mid-fifth century BCE, from the events which had taken place across the Mediterranean and Black Sea regions during the reigns of the first four Achaemenid Persian kings. Cyrus, Cambyses, Darius and Xerxes successively ruled their vast empire for nearly a century between 559 and 465 BCE. Herodotus' account culminates in the victory of Greece over Persia in 480-479 BCE, when Xerxes tried and failed, as his father Darius had a decade earlier, to extend his realm westward into the Mediterranean world by annexing mainland Greece. Herodotus often uses rational explanations, backed up by evidence. Much of the time he offers rational explanations for historical changes, including technological advances, commercial activity, succession crises and the character traits of individual rulers. But he also includes many traditional stories and legends, with patently fantastic elements, and supernatural causes, derived from poems and oral tradition. In one passage, Herodotus compares sensible meteorological reasons for the annual flooding of the Nile, but in another he narrates how the poet Arion was miraculously rescued



The statue of Herodotus in his home town of Halicarnassus, modern Bodrum, Turkey.

from drowning by a music-loving dolphin. The element of fable is one reason why Plutarch, the famous Greek writer of biographies centuries later under the Roman Empire, denigrated Herodotus as the 'Father of Lies'.³

Herodotus was a professional intellectual. Having been driven out of Halicarnassus, he moved to Athens, where Pericles was inviting cultured thinkers from all over the Greek diaspora to enrich the intellectual life of the democracy. Pericles eventually sent Herodotus, perhaps because he was

an expert on constitutional history, to help set up the new Greek colony in Thurii on the ball of the boot of Italy. That is where Herodotus probably put the finishing touches to his masterwork, and it was there that he died. But since he had been brought up in a hybrid Greek-Carian city-state ruled by vassal monarchs of the Persian Empire, he had valuable inside knowledge of the ancient Anatolian civilisations to share with the Greeks of the mainland. (His open-minded approach to foreign cultures and striking practice of cultural relativism was the reason for the patriotic Plutarch's other complaint about him, that he was *philobarbaros*, too kind to non-Greeks, universally known as 'barbarians').⁴ He was certainly writing partly for an educated audience of Athens-based philosophers and statesmen, who shared his cosmopolitanism and dispassionate assessment of cultural difference, and studied his *History* intensively to learn about their eastern neighbours. And since the Persian Empire covered such a vast area, Herodotus was also an expert in the social customs of the Thracians and Scythians to the north and the Egyptians, Ethiopians and Libyans to the south: he surely deserves the soubriquet 'Father of Anthropology' as well, on account of his excursions on the tribes of the Black Sea and ancient temple cults of the Nile delta.

But the individual episodes which alternate with ethnographic sections in the treatise were also performed in rhetorical displays at festivals such as the Olympic Games. In such competitions, Herodotus' success depended on his ability to enthral a crowd. And some of these individual episodes, because they are so entertaining, have always been brought by media other than simple translation— theatre, opera,

cinema—to parts of popular culture which more melancholy Greek historians, such as Thucydides and Polybius, can never reach. Recently, Herodotus has even made great box office. The stand of Leonidas at the battle of Thermopylae in 480 BCE, narrated in Herodotus' seventh book, has excited millions through Zack Snyder's unsubtle reading of Herodotus (or rather, of Frank Miller's graphic novella inspired by Herodotus) in his 2006 movie *300*.⁵ Snyder then wrote and produced *300: Rise of an Empire* (2014), which deals with the naval engagements at the same time, in which the Greeks defeated the Persian fleet at Artemisium and Salamis, and which has an even more questionable relationship with the first part of Herodotus Book Eight. An equally famous episode from Herodotus, however, is the story of the Lydian king Candaules, so besotted by his own wife that he invited his bodyguard Gyges to spy on her and admire her body unclothed: this was a key text in Anthony Minghella's film *The English Patient* (1996), adapted from Michael Ondaatje's prize-winning 1992 novel.⁶

The state of Herodotus scholarship always reveals much about the state of classics and of historiographical studies more widely. The Renaissance Herodotus was first read as a moralist and mirror of princes; Enlightenment thinkers laughed at his fabulous elements and treated him as a writer of fiction or an impassioned bard. It was only the rise of anthropology in tandem with imperial ethnography in the nineteenth century which rehabilitated him as a serious writer. In the twentieth century, the combined efforts of Arnaldo Momigliano, Isaiah Berlin and Oswyn Murray illustrated the incomparable role played by Herodotus in

Designing enquiries to make students think about interpretations of Herodotus

There are three main strands of interpretative thought which might easily be introduced to students in Key Stage 3, or those studying the ancient world post-16, including for an independent enquiry. First, you might use Herodotus as a springboard for a discussion of the purpose of history itself. If he was its father, then what was it to which he gave life? At its most basic you might ask *Why did Herodotus write?* This might be expanded for older students with more study under their belts: *How (and why?) has the purpose of history changed over time?*

Second, you might drill down into the way in which Herodotus has, himself, been interpreted. Professor Hall suggests a third 'Father of...' to add to the more familiar two, but what might students make of the way in which he

has been viewed by historians across the ages: *Why have historians' views of Herodotus changed so much?* Plutarch, for example, was writing as a historian to refute Cicero, whose reference to Herodotus was written in a text about constitutional law. What can be made of that?

Finally, you might begin with a significance, rather than an interpretation, enquiry: *Why has Herodotus attracted the imagination of so many people?* From Cicero, the lawyer, citing Herodotus directly, to Ondaatje, the novelist, using one of his stories, to Miller and Snyder retelling his set pieces (not to mention his impact on philosophy)... what is it about Herodotus that is so resonant, and *how has his significance affected our interpretations of him?*



the philosophy as well as the practice of history, while the reinstatement of oral sources at the heart of modern history did much to refresh interest among classicists in Herodotus, who wrote down interviews and transcribed regional inscriptions and archives.⁷ But his most recent revival inside the Academy is linked with the poststructuralist distrust of grand narratives, and with its accompanying love of multiplicity, ambiguity, and erasure of excessively

rigid dichotomies and categories.⁸ This makes it even more paradoxical that within popular culture, as Zack Snyder has demonstrated in *300* (routinely shown to members of the US army in military academies before they left to fight in Iraq or Afghanistan), the 'grand narrative' of the supposedly liberty-loving west's defeat of an eternally despotic Oriental foe remains perniciously seductive.

Further reading

The English-speaking reader of Herodotus now has the choice between two outstandingly readable prose translations, both of which offer up-to-date advice on further reading:

de Sélincourt, A. (1954) revised and annotated by Marincola, J. (2003) *The Histories*, London: Penguin

Holland, T. and Cartledge, P. (eds) (2013) *The Histories*, London: Penguin

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- ¹ Cicero (written ?c.58-52 BCE) *On the Laws*, 1.5 : see Zetzel, J. (2017) *Cicero : on the commonwealth and on the laws*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- ² Herington, J. (1991) 'The Poem of Herodotus' in *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics*, 1, no.3, pp. 5-16: p.8.
- ³ Plutarch (written ? early second century AD) *On the Malice of Herodotus 1*: see Goodwin, W. (1874) *Plutarch's Morals*, Cambridge: Little, Brown.
- ⁴ *Ibid.* section 3
- ⁵ Miller, F. (forthcoming) *Xerxes*, Milwaukie, Oregon: Dark Horse; Snyder, Z. (writer) (2014) *300: rise of an empire*, Warner Bros.
- ⁶ Ondaatje, M. (1992) *The English Patient*, McClelland & Stewart, Toronto; Minghella, A. (dir.) (1996) *The English Patient*, Miramax.
- ⁷ Momigliano, A. (1958) *The Place of Herodotus in the History of Historiography*, London: Blackwell; Berlin, I. (1953) *The Hedgehog and the Fox*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson; Murray, O. (1972) 'Herodotus and Hellenistic Culture' in *The Classical Quarterly*, 22, no.2, pp. 200-13.
- ⁸ This recent revival of interest is reflected in the revised and new editions of *The Histories* noted in the Further reading section.

This edition's Polychronicon was compiled by Edith Hall, Professor of Classics, King's College, London.

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