

Arms And the Man

What was Herodotus trying to tell us?

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History—the rational and methodical study of the human past—was invented by a single man just under twenty-five hundred years ago; just under twenty-five years ago, when I was starting a graduate degree in Classics, some of us could be pretty condescending about the man who invented it and (we'd joke) his penchant for flowered Hawaiian shirts.

The risible figure in question was Herodotus, known since Roman times as “the Father of History.” The sobriquet, conferred by Cicero, was intended as a compliment. Herodotus' Histories—a chatty, dizzily digressive nine-volume account of the Persian Wars of 490 to 479 B.C., in which a wobbly coalition of squabbling Greek city-states twice repulsed the greatest expeditionary force the world had ever seen—represented the first extended prose narrative about a major historical event. (Or, indeed, about virtually anything.) And yet to us graduate students in the mid-nineteen-eighties the word “father” seemed to reflect something hopelessly parental and passé about Herodotus, and about the sepia-toned “good war” that was his subject. These were, after all, the last years of the Cold War, and the terse, skeptical manner of another Greek historian—Thucydides, who chronicled the Peloponnesian War, between Athens and Sparta, two generations later—seemed far more congenial. To be an admirer of Thucydides' History, with its deep cynicism about political, rhetorical, and ideological hypocrisy, with its all too recognizable protagonists—a liberal yet imperialistic democracy and an authoritarian oligarchy, engaged in a war of attrition fought by proxy at the remote fringes of empire—was to advertise yourself as a hardheaded connoisseur of global Realpolitik.

Herodotus, by contrast, always seemed a bit of a sucker. Whatever his desire, stated in his Preface, to pinpoint the “root cause” of the Persian Wars (the rather abstract word he uses, *aitiē*, savors of contemporary science and philosophy), what you take away from an initial encounter with the Histories is not, to put it mildly, a strong sense of methodical rigor. With his garrulous first-person intrusions (“I have now reached a point at which I am compelled to declare an opinion that will cause offense to many people”), his notorious tendency to digress for the sake of the most abstruse detail (“And so the Athenians were the first of the Hellenes to make statues of Hermes with an erect phallus”), his apparently infinite susceptibility to the imaginative flights

of tour guides in locales as distant as Egypt (“Women urinate standing up, men sitting down”), reading him was like—well, like having an embarrassing parent along on a family vacation. All you wanted to do was put some distance between yourself and him, loaded down as he was with his guidebooks, the old Brownie camera, the gimcrack souvenirs—and, of course, that flowered polyester shirt.

A major theme of the *Histories* is the way in which time can effect surprising changes in the fortunes and reputations of empires, cities, and men; all the more appropriate, then, that Herodotus’ reputation has once again been riding very high. In the academy, his technique, once derided as haphazard, has earned newfound respect, while his popularity among ordinary readers will likely get a boost from the publication of perhaps the most densely annotated, richly illustrated, and user-friendly edition of his *Histories* ever to appear: “The Landmark Herodotus” (Pantheon; \$45), edited by Robert B. Strassler and bristling with appendices, by a phalanx of experts, on everything from the design of Athenian warships to ancient units of liquid measure. (Readers interested in throwing a wine tasting *à la grecque* will be grateful to know that one amphora was equal to a hundred and forty-four *kotyles*.)

The underlying cause—the *aitiē*—of both the scholarly and the popular revival is worth wondering about just now. It seems that, since the end of the Cold War and the advent of the Internet, the moment has come, once again, for Herodotus’ dazzlingly associative style and, perhaps even more, for his subject: implacable conflict between East and West.

Modern editors, attracted by the epic war story, have been as likely as not to call the work “The Persian Wars,” but Herodotus himself refers to his text simply as the publication of his *historiē*—his “research” or “inquiry.” The (to us) familiar-looking word *historiē* would to Herodotus’ audience have had a vaguely clinical air, coming, as it did, from the vocabulary of the newborn field of natural science. (Not coincidentally, the cradle of this scientific ferment was Ionia, a swath of Greek communities in coastal Asia Minor, just to the north of Halicarnassus, the historian’s birthplace.) The word only came to mean “history” in our sense because of the impact of Herodotus’ text.

The Greek cities of Ionia were where Herodotus’ war story began, too. These thriving settlements, which maintained close ties with their mother cities across the Aegean to the west, began, in the early sixth century B.C., to fall under the dominion of the rulers of the Asiatic kingdoms to the east; by the middle of the century, however, those kingdoms were themselves being swallowed up in the seemingly inexorable westward expansion of Persia, led by the charismatic empire builder Cyrus the Great. The *Histories* begins with a tale that illustrates this process of imperialist digestion—the story of Croesus, the famously wealthy king of Lydia. For Herodotus, Croesus was a satisfyingly pivotal figure, “the first barbarian known to us who subjugated and demanded tribute from some Hellenes” but who nonetheless ended up subjugated himself, blinded by his success to the dangers around him. (Before the great battle that cost him

his kingdom, he had arrogantly misinterpreted a pronouncement of the Delphic oracle that should have been a warning: “If you attack Persia, you will destroy a great empire.” And he did—his own.) The fable-like arc of Croesus’ story, from a deceptive and short-lived happiness to a tragic fall arising from smug self-confidence, admirably serves what will turn out to be Herodotus’ overarching theme: the seemingly inevitable movement from imperial hubris to catastrophic retribution.

The fall of Croesus, in 547 B.C., marked the beginning of the absorption of the Ionian Greeks into the Persian empire. Half a century later, starting in 499, these Greeks began a succession of open rebellions against their Persian overlords; it was this “Ionian Revolt” that triggered what we now call the Persian Wars, the Asian invasions of the Greek mainland in 490 and 480. Some of the rebellious cities had appealed to Athens and Sparta for military aid, and Athens, at least, had responded. Herodotus tells us that the Great King Darius was so infuriated by this that he instructed a servant to repeat to him the injunction “Master, remember the Athenians!” three times whenever he sat down to dinner. Contemporary historians see a different, less personal motive at the root of the war that was to follow: the inevitable, centrifugal logic of imperialist expansion.

Darius’ campaign against the Greeks, in 490, and, after his death, that of his son Xerxes, in 480-479, constituted the largest military undertakings in history up to that point. Herodotus’ lavish descriptions of the statistic-boggling preparations—he numbers Xerxes’ fighting force at 2,317,610 men, a figure that includes infantry, marines, and camel-riders—are among the most memorable passages of his, or any, history. Like all great storytellers, he takes his sweet time with the details, letting the dread momentum build as he ticks off each stage of the invasion: the gathering of the armies, their slow procession across continents, the rivers drunk dry, the astonishing feats of engineering—bridging the Hellespont, cutting channels through whole peninsulas—that more than live up to his promise, in the Preface, to describe *erga thōmasta*, “marvellous deeds.” All this, recounted in a tone of epic grandeur that self-consciously recalls Homer, suggests why most Greek cities, confronted with the approaching hordes, readily acceded to Darius’ demand for symbolic tokens of submission—“earth and water.” (In a nice twist, the defiant Athenians, a great naval power, threw the Persian emissaries into a pit, and the Spartans, a great land force, threw them down a well—earth and water, indeed.)

And yet, for all their might, both Persian expeditions came to grief. The first, after a series of military and natural disasters, was defeated at the Battle of Marathon, where a fabulously outnumbered coalition of Athenians and Plataeans held the day, losing only a hundred and ninety-two men to the Persians’ sixty-four hundred. (The achievement was such that the Greeks, breaking with their tradition of taking their dead back to their cities, buried them on the battlefield and erected a grave mound over the spot. It can still be seen today.) Ten years later, Darius’ son Xerxes returned to Greece, having taken over the preparations for an even vaster

invasion. Against all odds, the scrappy Greek coalition—this one including ultraconservative Sparta, usually loath to get involved in Panhellenic doings—managed to resist yet again.

It is to this second, far grander conflict that the most famous Herodotean tales of the Persian Wars belong; not for nothing do the names Thermopylae and Salamis still mean something today. In particular, the heroically suicidal stand of the three hundred Spartans—who, backed by only a couple of thousand allied troops, held the pass at Thermopylae against tens of thousands of Persians, long enough for their allies to escape and regroup farther to the south—has continued to resonate. Partly, this has to do with Herodotus' vivid description of the Greeks' feisty insouciance, a quality that all freedom fighters like to be able to claim. On hearing that the Persians were so numerous that their arrows would "blot out the sun," one Spartan quipped that this was good news, as it meant that the Greeks would fight in the shade. ("In the shade" is the motto of an armored division in the present-day Greek Army.)

But the persistent appeal of such scenes, in which the outnumbered Greeks unexpectedly triumph over the masses of Persian invaders, is ultimately less a matter of storytelling than of politics. Although Herodotus is unwilling to be anything but neutral on the relative merits of monarchy, oligarchy, and democracy (in a passage known as the "Debate on Government," he has critical things to say about all three), he ultimately structures his presentation of the war as a kind of parable about the conflict between free Western societies and Eastern despotism. (The Persians are associated with motifs of lashing, binding, and punishment.) While he isn't shy about portraying the shortcomings of the fractious Greek city-states and their leaders, all of them, from the luxury-loving Ionians to the dour Spartans, clearly share a desire not to answer to anyone but their own leaders.

Anyone, at any rate, was preferable to the Persian overlord Xerxes, who in Herodotus' narrative is the subject of a magisterial portrait of corrupted power. No one who has read the Histories is likely to forget the passage describing the impotent rage of Xerxes when his engineers' first attempt to create a bridge from Asia to Europe across the Hellespont was washed away by a storm: after commanding that the body of water be lashed three hundred times and symbolically fettered (a pair of shackles was tossed in), he chastised the "bitter water" for wronging him, and denounced it as "a turbid and briny river." More practically, he went on to have the project supervisors beheaded.

Herodotus' Xerxes is, however, a character of persuasive complexity, the swaggering cruelty alternating with childish petulance and sudden, sentimental paroxysms of tears: it's a personality likely to remind contemporary audiences of a whole panoply of dangerous dictators, from Nero to Hitler. One of the great, unexpected moments in the Histories, evoking the emotional finesse of the best fiction, comes when Xerxes, reviewing the ocean of forces he has assembled for the invasion, suddenly breaks down, "overcome," as he puts it to his uncle Artabanus (who has warned against the enterprise), "by pity as I considered the brevity of human life." Such feeling

for human life, in a dictator whose casual indifference to it is made clear throughout the narrative, is a convincing psychological touch. The unstable leader of a ruthlessly centralized authoritarian state is a nightmare vision that has plagued the sleep of liberal democracies ever since Herodotus created it.

Gripping and colorful as the invasions and their aftermaths are, the Greco-Persian Wars themselves make up just half of the *Histories*—from the middle of Book 5 to the end of the ninth, and final, book. This strongly suggests that Herodotus' preoccupation was with something larger still.

The first four and a half books of the *Histories* make up the first panel of what is, in fact, a diptych: they provide a leisurely account of the rise of the empire that will fall so spectacularly in the second part. Typically, Herodotus gives you everything you could conceivably want to know about Persia, from the semi-mythical, Oedipus-like childhood of Cyrus (he's condemned to exposure as a baby but returns as a young man, disastrously for those who wanted him to die), to the imperial zenith under Darius, a scant two generations later. (Darius, who had a talent for unglamorous but useful administrative matters—he introduced coined money, a reliable postal system, and the division of the empire into manageable provinces called satrapies—was known as “the shopkeeper.”) From book to book, the *Histories* lets you track Persia's expansion, mapped by its conflicts with whomever it is trying to subjugate at the time.

In Book 1, there are the exotic Massagetae, who were apparently strangers to the use, and abuse, of wine. (The Persians—like Odysseus with the Cyclops—get them drunk and then trounce them.) In Book 2 come the Egyptians, with their architectural immensities, their crocodiles, and their mummified pets, a nation whose curiosities are so numerous that the entire book is devoted to its history, culture, and monuments. In Book 3, the Persians come up against the Ethiopians, who (Herodotus has heard) are the tallest and most beautiful of all peoples. In Book 4, we get the mysterious, nomadic Scythians, who cannily use their lack of “civilization” to confound their would-be overlords: every time the Persians set up a fortified encampment, the Scythians simply pack up their portable dwellings and leave.

By the time of Darius' reign, Persia had become something that had never been seen before: a multinational empire covering most of the known world, from India in the east to the Aegean Sea in the west and Egypt in the south. The real hero of Herodotus' *Histories*, as grandiose, as admirable yet doomed, as any character you get in Greek tragedy, is Persia itself.

What gives this tale its unforgettable tone and character—what makes the narrative even more leisurely than the subject warrants—are those infamous, looping digressions: the endless asides, ranging in length from one line to an entire book (Egypt), about the flora and fauna, the lands and the customs and cultures, of the various peoples the Persian state tried to absorb. And within these digressions there are further digressions, an infinite regress of fascinating tidbits whose

apparent value for “history” may be negligible but whose power to fascinate and charm is as strong today as it so clearly was for the author, whose narrative modus operandi often seems suspiciously like free association. Hence a discussion of Darius’ tax-gathering procedures in Book 3 leads to an attempt to calculate the value of Persia’s annual tribute, which leads to a discussion of how gold is melted into usable ingots, which leads to an inquiry into where the gold comes from (India), which, in turn (after a brief detour into a discussion of what Herodotus insists is the Indian practice of cannibalism), leads to the revelation of where the Indians gather their gold dust. Which is to say, from piles of sand rich in gold dust, created by a species of—what else?—“huge ants, smaller than dogs but larger than foxes.” (In this case, at least, Herodotus’ guides weren’t necessarily pulling his leg: in 1996, a team of explorers in northern Pakistan discovered that a species of marmot throws up piles of gold-rich earth as it burrows.)

One reason that what often looks like narrative Rorschach is so much fun to read is Herodotus’ style. Since ancient times, all readers of Herodotus, whatever their complaints about his reliability, have acknowledged him as a master prose stylist. Four centuries after Herodotus died, Cicero wondered rhetorically “what was sweeter than Herodotus.” In Herodotus’ own time, it’s worth remembering, the idea of “beautiful prose” would have been a revolutionary one: the ancient Greeks considered prose so debased in comparison to verse that they didn’t even have a word for it until decades after the historian wrote, when they started referring to it simply as *psilos logos*, “naked language,” or *pedzos logos*, “walking language” (as opposed to the dancing, or even airborne, language of poetry). Herodotus’ remarkable accomplishment was to incorporate, in extended prose narrative, the fluid rhythms familiar from the earlier, oral culture of Homer and Hesiod. The lulling cadences and hypnotically spiralling clauses in each of his sentences—which replicate, on the microcosmic level, the ambling, appetitive nature of the work as a whole—suggest how hard Herodotus worked to bring literary artistry, for the first time, to prose. One twentieth-century translator of the Histories put it succinctly: “Herodotus’s prose has the flexibility, ease and grace of a man superbly talking.”

All the more unfortunate, then, that this and pretty much every other sign of Herodotus’ prose style is absent from “The Landmark Herodotus,” whose new translation, by Andrea L. Purvis, is both naked and pedestrian. A revealing example is her translation of the Preface, which, as many scholars have observed, cannily appropriates the high-flown language of Homeric epic to a revolutionary new project: to record the deeds of real men in real historical time. In the original, the entire Preface is one long, winding, quasi-poetic sentence, a nice taste of what’s to come; Purvis chops it into three flat-footed sections. Readers who want a real taste of Herodotean style can do a lot worse than the 1858 translation of George Rawlinson (Everyman’s Library; \$25), which beautifully captures the text’s rich Homeric flavor and dense syntax; more recently, the 1998 translation by Robin Waterfield (Oxford World’s Classics; \$10.95) loses the archaic richness but, particularly in the opening, gives off a whiff of the scientific milieu out of which the Histories arose.

But in almost every other way “The Landmark Herodotus” is an ideal package for this multifaceted work. Much thought has been given to easing the reader’s journey through the narrative: running heads along the top of each page provide the number of the book, the year and geographical location of the action described, and a brief description of that action. (“A few Athenians remain in the Acropolis.”) Particularly helpful are notes running down the side of each page, each one comprising a short gloss on the small “chapters” into which Herodotus’ text is traditionally divided. Just skimming these is a good way of getting a quick tour of the vast work: “The Persians hate falsehoods and leprosy but revere rivers”; “The Taurians practice human sacrifice with Hellenes and shipwreck survivors”; “The story of Artemisia, and how she cleverly evades pursuit by ramming a friendly ship and sinking it, leading her pursuer to think her a friendly ship or a defector.” And “The Landmark Herodotus” not only provides the most thorough array of maps of any edition but is also dense with illustrations and (sometimes rather amateurish) photographs—a lovely thing to have in a work so rich in vivid descriptions of strange lands, objects, and customs. In this edition, Herodotus’ description of the Egyptians’ fondness for pet cats is paired with a photograph of a neatly embalmed feline.

For all the ostensible detours, then, the first four and a half books of the Histories lay a crucial foundation for the reader’s experience of the war between Persia and Greece. The latter is not the “real” story that Herodotus has to tell, saddled with a ponderous, if amusing, preamble, but, rather, the carefully prepared culmination of a tale that grows organically from the distant origins of Persia’s expansionism to its unimaginable defeat. In the light of this structure, it is increasingly evident that Herodotus’ real subject is not so much the improbable Greek victory as the foreordained Persian defeat. But why foreordained? What, exactly, did the Persian empire do wrong?

The answer has less to do with some Greek sense of the inevitability of Western individualism triumphing over Eastern authoritarianism—an attractive reading to various constituencies at various times—than it does with the scientific milieu out of which Herodotus drew his idea of *historiē*. For Herodotus, the Persian empire was, literally, “unnatural.” He was writing at a moment of great intellectual interest in the difference between what we today (referring to a similarly fraught cultural debate) call “nature vs. nurture,” and what the Greeks thought of as the tension between *physis*, “nature,” and *nomos*, “custom” or “law” or “convention.” Like other thinkers of his time, he was particularly interested in the ways in which natural habitat determined cultural conventions: hence the many so-called “ethnographic” digressions.

This is why, with certain exceptions, he seems, perhaps surprisingly to us, to view the growth of the Persian empire as more or less organic, more or less “natural”—at least, until it tries to exceed the natural boundaries of the Asian continent. A fact well known to Greek Civ students is that the word *barbaros*, “barbarian,” did not necessarily have the pejorative connotations that it does for us: *barbaroi* were simply people who didn’t speak Greek and whose speech sounded, to Greek ears, like *bar-bar-bar*. So it’s suggestive that one of the very few times in the Histories

that Herodotus uses “barbarian” in our sense is when he’s describing Xerxes’ behavior at the Hellespont. As the classicist James Romm argues, in his lively short study “Herodotus” (Yale; \$25), for this historian there is something inherently wrong and bad with the idea of trying to bleed over the boundaries of one continent into another. It’s no accident that the account of the career of Cyrus, the empire’s founder, is filled with pointed references to his heedless treatment of rivers, the most natural of boundaries. (Cyrus dies, in fact, after ill-advisedly crossing the river Araxes, considered a boundary between Asia and Europe.)

What’s wrong with Persia, then, isn’t its autocratic form of government but its size, which in the grand cycle of things is doomed one day to be diminished. Early in the Histories, Herodotus makes reference to the way in which cities and states rise and fall, suddenly giving an ostensibly natural principle a moralizing twist:

I shall . . . proceed with the rest of my story recounting cities both lesser and greater, since many of those that were great long ago have become inferior, and some that are great in my own time were inferior before. And so, resting on my knowledge that human prosperity never remains constant, I shall make mention of both without discrimination.

The passage suggests that, both for states and for individuals, a coherent order operates in the universe. In this sense, history turns out to be not so different from that other great Greek invention—tragedy. The debt owed by Herodotus to Athenian tragedy, with its implacable trajectories from grandeur to abjection, has been much commented on by classicists, some of whom even attribute his evolution from a mere note-taker to a grand moralist of human affairs to the years spent in Athens, when he is said to have been a friend of Sophocles. (As one scholar has put it, “Athens was his Damascus.”)

Athens itself, of course, was to become the protagonist of one such tragico-historical “plot”: during Herodotus’ lifetime, the preëminent Greek city-state travelled a Sophoclean road from the heady triumph of the Persian Wars to the onset of the Peloponnesian War, a conflict during which it lost both its political and its moral authority. This is why it’s tempting to think, with certain classical historians, that the Histories were composed as a kind of friendly warning about the perils of imperial ambition. If the fate of the Persians could be intended as an object lesson for the Athenians, Herodotus’ ethical point is much larger than the superiority of the West to the East.

Only a sense of the cosmic scale of Herodotus’ moral vision, of the way it grafts the political onto the natural schema, can make sense of his distinctive style, of all the seemingly random detours and diversions—the narrative equivalents of the gimcrack souvenirs and brightly colored guidebooks and the flowered shirts. If you wonder, at the beginning of the story of Persia’s rise, whether you really need twenty chapters about the distant origins of the dynasty to which Croesus belongs, think again: that famous story of how Croesus’ ancestor Gyges assassinated the

rightful king and took the throne (to say nothing of the beautiful queen) provides information that allows you to fit Croesus' miserable ending into the natural scheme of things. His fall, it turns out, is the cosmic payback for his ancestor's crime: "Retribution would come," Herodotus says, quoting the Delphic oracle, "to the fourth descendant of Gyges."

These neat symmetries, you begin to realize, turn up everywhere, as a well-known passage from Book 3 makes clear:

Divine providence in its wisdom created all creatures that are cowardly and that serve as food for others to reproduce in great numbers so as to assure that some would be left despite the constant consumption of them, while it has made sure that those animals which are brutal and aggressive predators reproduce very few offspring. The hare, for example, is hunted by every kind of beast, bird, and man, and so reproduces prolifically. Of all animals, she is the only one that conceives while she is already pregnant. . . . But the lioness, since she is the strongest and boldest of animals, gives birth to only one offspring in her entire life, for when she gives birth she expels her womb along with her young. . . . Likewise, if vipers and the Arabian winged serpents were to live out their natural life spans, humans could not survive at all.

For Herodotus, virtually everything can be assimilated into a kind of natural cycle of checks and balances. (In the case of the vipers and snakes he refers to, the male is killed by the female during copulation, but the male is "avenged" by the fact that the female is killed by her young.) Because his moral theme is universal, and because his historical "plot" involves a world war, Herodotus is trying to give you a picture of the world entire, of how everything in it is, essentially, linked.

"Link," as it happens, is not a bad word to have in mind as you make your way through a text that is at once compellingly linear and disorientingly tangential. He pauses to give you information, however remotely related, about everything he mentions, and that information can take the form of a three-thousand-word narrative or a one-line summary. It only looks confusing or "digressive" because Herodotus, far from being an old fuddy-duddy, not nearly as sophisticated as (say) Thucydides, was two and a half millennia ahead of the technology that would have ideally suited his mentality and style. It occurs to you, as you read "The Landmark Herodotus"—with its very Herodotean footnotes, maps, charts, and illustrations—that a truly adventurous new edition of the Histories would take the digressive bits and turn them into what Herodotus would have done if only they'd existed.

Then again, Herodotus' work may have presaged another genre altogether. The passage about lions, hares, and vipers reminds you of the other great objection to Herodotus—his unreliability. (For one thing, nearly everything he says about those animals is wrong.) And yet, as you make your way through this amazing document, "accuracy"—or, at least, what we normally think of as scientific or even journalistic accuracy, "the facts"—seems to get less and less important. Did

Xerxes really weep when he reviewed his troops? Did the aged, corrupt Hippias, the exiled tyrant of Athens now in the service of Darius, really lose a tooth on the beach at Marathon before the great battle began, a sign that he interpreted (correctly) to mean that he would never take back his homeland? Perhaps not. But that sudden closeup, in which the preparations for war focus, with poignant suddenness, on a single hopeless old has-been, has indelible power. Herodotus may not always give us the facts, but he unfailingly supplies something that is just as important in the study of what he calls *ta genomena ex anthrōpōn*, or “things that result from human action”: he gives us the truth about the way things tend to work as a whole, in history, civics, personality, and, of course, psychology. (“Most of the visions visiting our dreams tend to be what one is thinking about during the day.”)

All of which is to say that while Herodotus may or may not have anticipated hypertext, he certainly anticipated the novel. Or at least one kind of novel. Something about the Histories, indeed, feels eerily familiar. Think of a novel, written fifty years after a cataclysmic encounter between Europe and Asia, containing both real and imagined characters, and expressing a grand vision of the way history works in a highly tendentious, but quite plausible, narrative of epic verve and sweep. Add an irresistible anti-hero eager for a conquest that eludes him precisely because he understands nothing, in the end, about the people he dreams of subduing; a hapless yet winning indigenous population that, almost by accident, successfully resists him; and digressions powerfully evoking the cultures whose fates are at stake in these grand conflicts. Whatever its debt to the Ionian scientists of the sixth century B.C. and to Athenian tragedy of the fifth, the work that the Histories may most remind you of is “War and Peace.”

And so, in the end, the contemporary reader is likely to come away from this ostensibly archaic epic with the sense of something remarkably familiar, even contemporary. That cinematic style, with its breathtaking wide shots expertly alternating with heart-stopping closeups. The daring hybrid genre that integrates into a grand narrative both flights of empathetic fictionalizing and the anxious, footnote-prone self-commentary of the obsessive, perhaps even neurotic amateur scholar. (To many readers, the Histories may feel like something David Foster Wallace could have dreamed up.) A postmodern style that continually calls attention to the mechanisms of its own creation and peppers a sprawling narrative with any item of interest, however tangentially related to the subject at hand.

Then, there is the story itself. A great power sets its sights on a smaller, strange, and faraway land—an easy target, or so it would seem. Led first by a father and then, a decade later, by his son, this great power invades the lesser country twice. The father, so people say, is a bland and bureaucratic man, far more temperate than the son; and, indeed, it is the second invasion that will seize the imagination of history for many years to come. For although it is far larger and more aggressive than the first, it leads to unexpected disaster. Many commentators ascribe this disaster to the flawed decisions of the son: a man whose bluster competes with, or perhaps covers for, a certain hollowness at the center; a leader who is at once hobbled by personal demons (among

which, it seems, is an Oedipal conflict) and given to grandiose gestures, who at best seems incapable of comprehending, and at worst is simply incurious about, how different or foreign his enemy really is. Although he himself is unscathed by the disaster he has wreaked, the fortunes and the reputation of the country he rules are seriously damaged. A great power has stumbled badly, against all expectations.

Except, of course, the expectations of those who have read the Histories. If a hundred generations of men, from the Athenians to ourselves, have learned nothing from this work, whose apparent wide-eyed naïveté conceals, in the end, an irresistible vision of the way things always seem to work out, that is their fault and not the author's. Time always tells, as he himself knew so well. However silly he may once have looked, Herodotus, it seems, has had the last laugh.