

CHAPTER 1

HERODOTUS
AND WORLD
HISTORY

I went once to a certain place in Arabia ... to make inquiries concerning the winged serpents ... The story goes, that with the spring the winged snakes come flying from Arabia towards Egypt, but are met in this gorge by the birds called ibises, who forbid their entrance and destroy them all. The Arabians assert, and the Egyptians also admit, that it is on account of the service thus rendered that the Egyptians hold the ibis in so much reverence ... The winged serpent is shaped like the water-snake. Its wings are not feathered, but resemble very closely those of the bat. And thus I conclude the subject of the sacred animals. (Herodotus, 2.75–6)¹

For myself, my duty is to report all that is said; but I am not obliged to believe it all alike – a remark which may be understood to apply to my whole History. (Herodotus, 7.152)

In the fifth century BCE Herodotus, the historian of the wars between Persia and Greece, and Thucydides, the historian of the Peloponnesian war between Athens and Sparta later in the century, established Western historical writing. They are its undisputed foundational figures, recognised as such in the ancient world itself and for ever after. Yet the kind of history they inaugurated has

always been in dispute.² In his *The Greek Historians* (1997), T.J. Luce tells us that the Roman statesman Cicero cited Herodotus as the Father of History, but almost in the same breath referred to him as a purveyor of countless tall tales. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, Herodotus, especially in his stories of the wonders of Arabia, was accused of being the Father of Lies, and a reputation as the Great Liar has continued: not only was he a Great Liar in his frequent fantastical storytelling and apparent gullibility, but he was never the great traveller and first-hand observer of customs in many and diverse lands he claimed to be; he never went to places like Lower Egypt, Babylon, and the Black Sea.³ Thucydides has always been held to be a far more focussed and disciplined historian than Herodotus; yet the austere temper of his history too has frequently been discussed in terms of its possible relations to Greek tragedy, medical theories of diagnosis, and pre-Socratic philosophy.⁴

These varied readings indicate a foundational ambiguity in Herodotus and Thucydides themselves, in how they conceived the historical enterprise. In this and the following chapter we argue that Herodotus and Thucydides established the curious *doubleness* of history: history as a sustained inquiry into the past; history as literary, engaged in narrative, history as drama, engaged in the creation of scenes, characters, and speeches.⁵

I

We will begin with the earlier historian. In our view, Herodotus' *The Histories* created for the continuing future of historical writing a cosmopolitan international mode of world history. Here we sharply diverge from conventional approaches that argue for the value of Herodotus because his stories can be seen as revealing ancient Greek historical consciousness. François Hartog, for example, introduces *The Mirror of Herodotus* (1988) by claiming that through Herodotus we can discover how the Greeks of the classical period saw non-Greeks, how Greece saw its others, for as Herodotus travelled the world and told of it, he set that world within the 'context of Greek knowledge' and hence 'constructed for the Greeks a representation of their own recent past'. For Hartog, there is interchangeability between the Greek world and the world created in Herodotus' book.⁶

The Histories, we argue to the contrary, does not assume the centrality of

Greek culture and history. The work is anti-nationalist and anti-ethnocentric, Herodotus announcing in his very opening sentence that he wishes to preserve from decay 'the great and wonderful actions of the Greeks and Barbarians'; neither Greeks nor Persians are to lose 'their due meed of glory'. *The Histories* reveals a sophisticated methodology that at once creates and disperses meanings and interpretations, a pluralising methodology that anticipates contemporary literary and cultural theory, especially if we think of three of modernity's greatest literary philosophers: Walter Benjamin, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Jacques Derrida. Since *The Histories* appeared near the beginning of the Greek prose tradition, we can say that the birth of history is in effect coincident with the birth of prose. Sometimes extended stories in *The Histories* read like novellas, and the effect of the whole, in terms of created characters, reading of dreams and omens and prophecies, exploring of dilemmas, dramatic speeches, reported actions, fantastical ethnography, is novelistic.

We see Herodotus as a kind of outsider figure in relation to any settled ethnic or national identity. He owed and professed in *The Histories* no fealty to any particular Greek nation-state, and in part was an outsider to Greekness itself, free to be as critical – or admiring – of any Greek society as of any other society in the worlds, far and near, that he knew or knew of. He was born in Halicarnassus (modern Bodrum, on the Aegean coast of Turkey), possibly in 484 BCE, and died soon after 430 BCE, probably in the panhellenic Greek city of Thurii in southern Italy. On his father's side, it would appear that Herodotus was not Greek but Carian, the Carians being the native people in the hinterland of Halicarnassus, a city that in his earliest years was part of the Persian Empire. Halicarnassus was a city on the margins, of the Persian Empire, of Ionia, and of the non-Greek hinterland. Herodotus claimed to have spent most of his life travelling, with extended stays on the island of Samos, in Athens, and elsewhere in Greece as well as extensively in eastern and Mediterranean societies. In the Greece and wider world of his day, travel was frequent by itinerant philosophers and thinkers, and in this sense Herodotus can be considered a cosmopolitan intellectual-traveller-flâneur in an internationally connected world that often valued the viewpoint and knowledge of the outsider, the stranger, who could arbitrate local differences and suggest alternatives. As we shall see, the enemy of such wisdom was always the hubris of rulers.⁷

In *The Histories*, Herodotus makes it clear that offering hospitality, haven, sustenance and kindness to travellers, supplicants, refugees and exiles was part

of international law that stretched at least from Egypt and Persia to Greece (1.73; 2.115; 5.51; 6.70; 7.104; 9.76). Kindness to messengers and ambassadors was also part of international law. At one point in *The Histories* Herodotus refers to the outraging of such law by Athens and Sparta who had brutally killed messengers sent by the Persian king Darius (7.133). He relates the anger and contempt of the Persian king Xerxes who, recalling this 'former outrage', said 'with true greatness of soul' to some heralds of the Lacedaemonians (Spartans) who had come to apologise, that 'he would not act like the Lacedaemonians, who, by killing the heralds, had broken the laws which all men hold in common' (7.136). As it turned out, many years later the sons of the two Lacedaemonians, who had come as ambassadors to Xerxes on this mission of apology, were put to death by the Athenians. The narrator of *The Histories* suggests that manifest here in such retribution might be 'the hand of Heaven' (7.137).

A signal aspect of *The Histories* is the number of stories and digressions (*logoi*) that are highly critical of the Greek city-states, not sparing even democratic Athens from stories of prejudice, ignorance, cruelty, treachery, and betrayal. Herodotus refers to the Greeks frequently telling 'many tales without due investigation', for example, that the Egyptians engaged in human sacrifices. Of a story that Heracles only just escaped being sacrificed in Egypt, Herodotus comments: 'Now it seems to me that such a story proves the Greeks to be utterly ignorant of the character and customs' of the Egyptians (2.45). Herodotus tells the story of the escape from Sparta of Demaratus, a deposed king distinguished among the Lacedaemonians for many noble deeds (including winning at Olympia the prize in the four-horse chariot-race) and wise counsels; Demaratus, fleeing his countrymen who were pursuing him, made his way by sea to Asia, and presented himself before King Darius, who granted him exile and received him generously, giving him both lands and cities (6.70). Herodotus also suggests that the woes that befell the Greeks during the wars with the Persians were caused partly by internal contentions between the Greeks themselves, with some Greek states looking to rewards from the Persians and ready to 'betray' their country (6.98, 100). The Greeks were not blameless victims. King Xerxes felt that it was necessary to wreak vengeance upon the Athenians for they had made unprovoked attacks upon the Persians (7.8). *The Histories* refers to a story where the Persians express astonishment at what they see as the almost incomprehensible levels of

internecine violence and warfare among the Greeks. Mardonius, one of Xerxes' chief military commanders, comments: 'these very Greeks are wont to wage wars against one another in the most foolish way, through sheer perversity and doltishness'. Instead of interchanging heralds and messengers and making up their differences 'by any means rather than battle', the Greeks attempt to destroy each other, with the conquerors usually departing with great losses, while the conquered are 'destroyed altogether' (7.9).

In the decisive sea battle won by the Greeks, the Athenian commanders like Themistocles were not above corruption and bribery (8.4–5), while some of the Ionian Greeks who fought on the Persians' side 'saw with pleasure the attack on Greece', vying eagerly with each other 'which should be the first to make prize of an Athenian ship, and thereby to secure himself a rich reward from the king' (8.10). Once the Greek fleet had won, and the Persians had fled the scene of battle and sped towards the Hellespont, the Greeks (in this case the Athenians) immediately laid siege to their fellow Greeks in the vicinity, demanding large sums from islanders like the Carystians and the Parians, who gave it to them out of fear. The inhabitants of the isle of Andros, however, resisted paying. To Themistocles' declaration that the money must needs be paid, as the Athenians had brought with them two mighty gods, to wit, Persuasion and Necessity, the Andrians replied that they were wretchedly poor, stinted for land, and cursed with two unprofitable gods, who always dwelt with them and would never quit their island, namely Poverty and Helplessness (8.111–12). Unheeding, the Athenians then laid siege to Andros, an action which perhaps prefigured the imperial arrogance in the Athenian empire that developed after the defeat of Persia. The episode anticipates the famous Melian Dialogue of Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*.

Themistocles distinguished himself in these rapacious actions. Certainly he was clever. He had after all advised the Athenians how to interpret the crucial oracle before the war, that said 'Safe shall the wooden wall continue for thee and thy children' and 'Holy Salamis, thou shalt destroy the offspring of women'. Themistocles convinced his fellow citizens that these images meant that it was the Persians who would be destroyed by the Athenians' wooden ships at Salamis (7.141–3). And in war he was resourceful, cunning, and successful. But Themistocles was also a war profiteer, secretive (receiving money without telling the other captains), and willing to betray his fellow Greeks for his own safety and gain if the occasion required it (8.111–12).

The Greeks could commit extraordinary cruelties. While Xerxes returned to Persia, his general Mardonius decided to attack the city of Athens again, but found it empty, the Athenians having withdrawn to their ships or to Salamis: 'he only gained possession of a deserted town'. Mardonius despatched a Hellespontine Greek to the Athenians to offer them terms; when Lycidas, one of the Athenian councillors, gave his opinion that the Persian proposals be heard by the council and also be submitted to an assembly of the people, the Athenians became enraged and, surrounding Lycidas, stoned him to death; when the Athenian women heard about Lycidas, they flocked to Lycidas' house, where they stoned to death his wife and children (9.3–5).

So critical on many occasions are the stories of *The Histories* against the Greeks that Plutarch in his 'On the Malice of Herodotus' accused Herodotus of being *philobarbaros*, too fond of foreigners and the viewpoints of foreigners, malicious towards his fellow Greeks.⁸

Far from expressing or reflecting Greek consciousness, then, Herodotus remains detached, adopting in antiquity what we might refer to now – if we think of twentieth-century philosophers, literary critics, and jurists like Hannah Arendt, Jaspers, Bakhtin, Auerbach, Spitzer, Lemkin, Edward Said – as world thought, world culture, world literature, world history.⁹ Raphaël Lemkin, the great Polish-Jewish jurist who formulated the notion of genocide in his 1944 *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*, wrote in his autobiographical fragment 'Totally Unofficial Man' that from his time as a refugee fleeing Poland in 1939 he wished his life to proceed by enlarging the concept of world-awareness, or rather the oneness of the world.¹⁰

Herodotus also anticipates the thought of Lemkin in not positing history as a delusory or comforting narrative of progress.¹¹ As Herodotus wrote in *The Histories*, 'nothing is impossible in the long lapse of ages' (5.9), and such could include the very worst as well as the very best of human possibilities; either could occur at any moment.

II

Herodotus pursues a double desire in *The Histories*: a desire to find truth if he can; and a desire to record stories even where truth is impossible to ascertain.

In terms of the first desire, Herodotus wishes his *historia* to be a disciplined