

Truth in History: The principles of Herodotus in connection with the work of Dimitris Kyrtatas

Nanno Marinatos
Emerita, Distinguished Professor of
Classics University of Illinois at Chicago

Περίληψη: Το έργο του Δ. Κυρτάτα χαρακτηρίζεται από την ισορροπημένη παρουσίαση των πηγών που οδηγεί σε δίκαιες αποτιμήσεις της ιστορικής πραγματικότητας. Το ίδιο περίπου κάνει και ο αγαπημένος του αρχαίος συγγραφέας, ο ιστορικός Ηρόδοτος. Πολλές φορές παραθέτει και αυτός πηγές που δεν θα τις θεωρούσε αξιόπιστες ένας επαγγελματίας ιστορικός σήμερα, όμως η ανθρώπινη φαντασία είναι και αυτή μέρος της ιστορίας. Όπως γράφει χαρακτηριστικά: «στο κάτω κάτω, τα παραμύθια και τα ανέκδοτα, οι συκοφαντίες και οι παραπλανητικές διαδόσεις είναι επίσης μέρος της ιστορίας» (Οδός 2020, 19).

Abstract: The work of D. Kyrtatas is characterized by the balanced presentation of the sources that leads to fair assessments of the historical reality. His favorite ancient writer, the historian Herodotus, does much the same since he often cites sources that a professional historian today would not consider credible. However, both Herodotus and Kyrtatas believe that imagination is an integral part of human history. As D. Kyrtatas characteristically writes: "After all, fairy tales and anecdotes, slander and misleading propaganda are also part of history" (Odos 2020, 19).

Λέξεις κλειδιά: Αλήθεια, ιστορία, δικαιοσύνη, πολυφωνία

Key words: Truth, history, fairness, polyphony

Polyphony

If I were to single out one recognizable feature of Dimitris Kyrtatas' scholarly work, this would be his narrative fairness, his reluctance to pass judgments on characters and situations and his unwillingness to privilege formal traditions over secondary ones. In his view, every tradition contains valuable elements and hence is entitled to discussion. Kyrtatas achieves his goals first by selecting the appropriate materials (see below) and second by minimizing his own authorial interference. He often cites points of view exactly as presented by the original narrators of the ancient texts and by so doing, he

avoids succumbing to academic orthodoxy. In his book *Ελληνική Αρχαιότητα* (*Greek Antiquity*), co-authored with Spyridon Rangos, the writers declare that they are interested in rendering what the ancient authors handed down, the how and why of their arguments, without trying to relate their sayings to modern academic orthodoxy.

Δεν υιοθετήσαμε πλήρως την υπερκριτική στάση της σύγχρονης έρευνας. Ενδιαφερθήκαμε συχνά να αποδώσουμε τι παραδίδουν οι αρχαίοι συγγραφείς, πώς και γιατί ισχυρίζονται, χωρίς να συσχετίσουμε πάντοτε τα λεγόμενά τους με τα πορίσματα της νεότερης ακαδημαϊκής ορθοδοξίας. Ένα από τα μελήματα μας ήταν οι τρόποι πρόσληψης του παρελθόντος... από τους ίδιους τους Έλληνες. Επινοημένοι θρύλοι και μεταγενέστερα ανέκδοτα εκτίθενται ενίοτε ως στοιχεία ενδεικτικά του αρχαίου τρόπου σκέψης (*Ελληνική Αρχαιότητα* 2010, 15).

The title of Kyrtatas' latest book *Η Οδός* (*Pathway*) is suggestive of the multiple paths of the world of Late Antiquity and includes a wide range of sources and unusual tales, some of which may appear unreliable to the factual historian. And yet, such stories yield information which is of great interest. "After all," Kyrtatas writes, "tales and anecdotes, slander and misleading rumours are also part of history" (στο κάτω κάτω, τα παραμύθια και τα ανέκδοτα, οι συκοφαντίες και οι παραπλανητικές διαδόσεις είναι επίσης μέρος της ιστορίας) (*Οδός* 2020, 19).

This makes Kyrtatas' scholarly work polyphonic.

Herodotus: Human thought as History

Given the polyphonic approach, it is appropriate to include in this honorary volume some reflections on his favourite ancient historian, Herodotus, whose story-telling is also polyphonic. Needless to repeat what is well-known, namely that Herodotus has been severely misunderstood in the past. He was once viewed as an unreliable historian, a collector of tales and fantasies, a geographer whose original purpose was to be a sensationalist ethnographer and an entertainer of the public. The great German scholar Felix Jacoby, however, while maintaining the view that Herodotus was originally a geographer, also stressed that the latter developed into a good historian.¹ Others have been less kind even calling him a liar who manipulated his evidence by use of rhetorical tricks and fake autopsies.² Fortunately, this extreme position has not found general acceptance: now Herodotus is viewed as a complex and, for the most part, reliable narrator.³

¹ Jacoby 1913; Aly 1921.

² Fehling 1989.

³ See Lloyd 1975-78; Hartog 2009. Most important is the debate between Fehling 1989 and Prichett 1993. For Herodotus' narrative technique see Bakker, de Jong and van Wees 2002; Baragwanath and de Bakker 2012.

The issue here, however, is not only Herodotus' reliability but also his approach to reporting. Take as an example what he writes about the distant lands of the northern sphere. He admits that he did not visit these places in person because of their remote location at the edges of the world, but he reproduces what he has heard from others, sometimes repeating the writings of older poets. He does not hesitate to use oral reports collected during his travels.

Regarding places and creatures in the distant north, Herodotus writes:

There is also a story related in a poem by Aristeas son of Caüstrobius, a man of Proconnesus. This Aristeas, possessed by Phoebus, visited the Issedones; beyond these (he said) live the one-eyed Arimaspians, beyond whom are the griffins that guard gold, and beyond these again the Hyperboreans, whose territory reaches to the sea (4.13.1; Godley).

Herodotus does not claim here that his report is factually true but rather the opposite, since he states explicitly that he could not find eyewitnesses who had seen the lands and creatures of the north with their own eyes:

I can find out from no one who claims to know as an eyewitness. For even Aristeas, whom I recently mentioned—even he did not claim to have gone beyond the Issedones, even though a poet; but he spoke by hearsay of what lay north, saying that the Issedones had told him. *But all that we have been able to learn for certain by report of the farthest lands shall be told.* (4. 16. 1-2; Godley; italics mine).

Given Herodotus' admittance that reports are not verifiable, the reader has the right to wonder why he bothers to record the poet Aristeas' account. The answer is that he made a conscious choice to record *all versions of human thought* and not to confine himself to those facts which were provable by autopsy. All stories, written or oral, had a certain validity for him because fantasy was in itself a record of human history.

Consider another passage in which Herodotus describes a lake near Chalcedon, in North Africa.

It is said that there is a lake on this island from which the maidens of the country draw gold-dust out of the mud on feathers smeared with pitch. *I do not know whether this is true; I just write what is said* (4. 195.3; Godley; italics mine).

Even though the story cannot be verified, Herodotus decides here that hearsay constitutes an aspect of human tradition but warns his reader that a distinction must be drawn between verifiable truth and hearsay (εἰ μὲν ἔστι ἀληθέως οὐκ οἶδα, τὰ δὲ λέγεται γράφω). This reminds of Kyrtatas' *dictum* that even misleading traditions are part of history (*Oδός* 2020, 19).

Reason and Scientific Truth

As has already been hinted above, Herodotus was *not* indifferent to the factuality of circumstances, places and events. On the contrary, when he proposes a hypothesis, he takes pains to spell out his evidence and to base his theory on reason. For example, he declares that the alleged pyramid of Rhodopis in Egypt was not built by this famous courtesan (incidentally, Rhodopis was of Greek origin but lived in Egypt) because she did not possess the richness necessary to build a pyramid:

...indeed, it is clear to me that they say this without even knowing who Rhodopis was (otherwise, they would never have credited her with the building of a pyramid on which what I may call an uncountable sum of money was spent) ... (2. 134.2; Godley).

Herodotus concludes that the story is not reliable on the basis of reason. Another example concerns the mythical river Ocean, which certain ancient researchers (like Hecataeus) had associated with the origins of the Nile. Herodotus, however, claims that this river did not really exist - except in human fantasy.

The opinion about Ocean is grounded in obscurity and needs no disproof; for I know of no Ocean river; and I suppose that Homer or some older poet invented this name and brought it into his poetry (2.23; Godley).

By making this statement about fantasy and invention, Herodotus shows that he was perfectly aware of the difference between written testimony and autopsy, on the one hand, and oral tales, on the other, showing awareness that oral tradition may involve fantasy and does not qualify as scientific truth. When it comes to scientific truth he is very strict and insists on solid evidence: autopsy, tokens, clues (τεκμήρια 2. 13; 9. 100; μαρτύριον 2.22.2). Clues and physical evidence are combined, and an inference is drawn to propose a plausible conclusion (the word he uses is οικότως, 2. 245). For example, Herodotus deduces the Greekness of Macedonians from the historical evidence that their king Alexander was proven to be Greek:

Now that these descendants of Perdicas are Greeks, as they themselves say, I myself chance to know and will prove it in the later part of my history (ἀποδέξω ὡς εἰσὶ Ἕλληνας).

Furthermore, the Hellenodicae who manage the contest at Olympia determined that it is so, for when Alexander chose to contend and entered the lists for that purpose, the Greeks who were to run against him wanted to bar him from the race, saying that the contest should be for Greeks and not for foreigners. Alexander, however, proving himself to be an Argive, was judged to be a Greek. He accordingly competed in the furlong race and tied step for first place. This, then, is approximately what happened (5. 22 1-2; Godley).

At another place, Herodotus argues that reason leads to plausible historical hypotheses: “what is not knowable I deduce” (τά μὴ γινωσκόμενα τεκμαιρόμενος, 2.33.2). As for autopsy, he checks some of the facts in person so that he may discern with clarity what happened (σαφὲς τι εἰδέναι, 2. 44).⁴ For example, he sails to Tyre to inspect the sanctuary of Heracles about which he has heard rumours of its wealth, but he does not stop at hearsay wishing to verify the rumours in person. Thus, he records first what he saw with his own eyes (εἶδον), and then draws further conclusions from clues (σημεῖα), which testify to the fact that the sanctuary was rich and holy. In short, when his concern is scientific truth, his method is sound even by modern standards of historiography.

Even Herodotus’ attitude to the divine is based on reason and not on mere faith. For example, the same signs/omens were received by Greeks at two different places during the Persian wars in the same day, at Mycale and Plataia: this, he thinks, this is not coincidence but evidence of divine intervention in human affairs.

Now there are many clear indications of the divine ordering of things, seeing that a message, which greatly heartened the army and made it ready to face danger, arrived amongst the Greeks the very day on which the Persians' disaster at Plataea and that other which was to befall them at Mykale took place (9. 100. 2; Godley).

δῆλα δὲ πολλοῖσι τεκμηρίοισι ἐστὶ τὰ θεῖα τῶν πρηγμάτων, εἰ καὶ τότε, τῆς αὐτῆς ἡμέρης συμπιπτούσης τοῦ τε ἐν Πλαταιῆσι καὶ τοῦ ἐν Μυκάλῃ μέλλοντος ἔσεσθαι τρώματος, φήμη τοῖσι Ἕλλησι τοῖσι ταύτη ἐσαπίκετο, ὥστε θαρσῆσαι τε τὴν στρατιὴν πολλῶ μᾶλλον καὶ ἐθέλειν προθυμότερον κινδυνεύειν (9.100.2).

Cases of Personal Condemnation

As far as versions of truth are concerned, Herodotus may either maintain his distance and give the points of view of both sides, or he may pass a severe judgment but bases it on solid moral grounds.

An example of the former category (staying distant) concerns the role of Argos during the Persian Wars. This issue was probably hotly debated in Athens when Herodotus was resident there composing and performing his monumental *oeuvre*.⁵ Athens was considering the possibility of making an alliance with Argos only a year after she had signed a peace treaty with Sparta (Peace of Nicias 421 BCE). The Athenian statesman Nicias believed that an alliance with Argos would endanger the peace with Sparta since Argos was an enemy of the former city. But other politicians, especially the

⁴ Scanlon 2002, 140-144, points out that *safo*s is sometimes coupled with clear sight, that which is visible. Herodotus may be indebted to Xenophanes as Lloyd 1975 (v. 1), 158-60, claims.

⁵ Fornara 1981; Luraghi 2018.

young Alcibiades, did not hesitate to promote the alliance and was willing to risk alienation from Sparta (Thuc.5. 43).

As the issue was debated, some people plausibly brought forth the accusation that the Argives had medized during the Persian wars some 60 years earlier. On this issue, Herodotus does not pass judgment.

Now, whether it is true that Xerxes sent a herald with such a message to Argos [namely invitation to medize], and that the Argive envoys came up to Susa and questioned Artaxerxes about their friendship, I cannot say with exactness, nor do I now declare that I consider anything true except what the Argives themselves say. This, however, I know full well, namely if all men should carry their own private troubles to market for barter with their neighbors, there would not be a single one who, when he had looked into the troubles of other men, would not be glad to carry home again what he had brought. The conduct of the Argives was accordingly not utterly shameful. As for myself, although it is my business to set down that which is told me, to believe it is none at all of my business (ἐγὼ δὲ ὀφείλω λέγειν τὰ λεγόμενα, πείθεσθαί γε μὲν οὐ παντάπασιν ὀφείλω). This I ask the reader to hold true for the whole of my history, for there is another tale current, according to which it would seem that it was the Argives who invited the Persian into Hellas, because the war with the Lacedaemonians was going badly, and they would prefer anything to their present distresses (7. 152.1-3; Godley modified).

In the above case, Herodotus is fair to the Argives by carefully maintaining his distance. But consider how differently he discusses Ephialtes, the man who led the Persians along a secret path and enabled them to surround Leonidas at Thermopylai. In this instance, Herodotus records Ephialtes' name with the purpose of staining his memory and does so deliberately. Note, however, that he has made sure first that he was indeed the traitor.

Onetes might have known the path, although he was not a Malian, if he had often come to that country, but Ephialtes was the one who guided them along the path around the mountain. *It is he whom I put on record as guilty* (τοῦτον αἴτιον γράφω, 7. 214, Godley, italics mine).

By putting the traitor's name on record, Herodotus makes the accusation permanent for future generations to read and takes a firm stand against all those who betrayed their fellow Greeks. At the same time, he expresses his admiration for Leonidas with the intention of preserving the latter's glory for the future.

...he would leave a name of great fame, and the prosperity of Sparta would not be blotted out (κλέος μέγα ἐλείπετο, καὶ ἡ Σπάρτης εὐδαιμονία οὐκ ἐξηλείφετο, 7. 220.2-3; Godley).

The few passages discussed in this paper illustrate a paradox. Herodotus was fair but not always distant since, on certain occasions, he declares his opinion- even his subjectivity - openly and decidedly. His subjectivity, though, is based on clear principle. When he bestows praise, it is because the individual put the community above their own self-interest, as Leonidas did. Conversely, when the individual puts his personal interests above the good of others (as Ephialtes did), Herodotus does not hesitate to condemn the character especially those who committed outrageous transgressions, moral and religious.⁶

Returning now to the work of Kyrtatas, he is careful not to pass judgments even on matters of ethics. In his book *Παιδαγωγός* (*The Educator*), he writes: “I must stress that my own subject is education not ethics.” (Οφείλω να τονίσω, ότι το θέμα μου είναι η ηθική διαπαιδαγώγηση, όχι η ηθική).⁷

Truth in History: Selecting Materials

As we have seen, truth and fairness in history are complex matters. Herodotus does not claim total objectivity, which is anyway difficult to attain since the selection of events is itself predetermined by the selector’s perceptual filters, but he claims fairness when he writes that he will report both about the large and the small states:

For many states that were once great have now become small; and those that were great in my time were small before. Knowing therefore that human prosperity never continues in the same place, I shall mention both alike. (1. 5)

It has also been mentioned here that Herodotus pronounces his personal judgement on matters of ethics, if he can show that an individual harmed his or her community or committed some heinous crime of which even the divine disapproves.⁸ Concerning how he selected his material, he reproduces a variety of sources and types of materials with the aim of presenting a complex and fair record of human history including different versions of events, Greek or non-Greek.

These are the stories of the Persians and the Phoenicians. For my part, I shall not say that this or that story is true, but I shall identify the one who I myself know did the Greeks unjust deeds (1. 4-5; Godley)

I will end with the type of material which Dimitris Kyrtatas selects for his historical treatises. First, he chooses material which does not reproduce official dogma. Second, he seeks better to understand the role played by underrepresented groups, for example slaves or women who, as he demonstrates, played a major role in spreading Christianity: an

⁶ See below n.7.

⁷ Kyrtatas 1994, 13.

⁸ Examples are Cambyses’ crimes of madness, Cleomenes’ transgressions in state of madness (5.42) and Pheretima’s excessive revenge of the wives of her enemy which incited the ill-will of the divine (4. 205).

example is a lady of the aristocracy who hosted Origen and favoured Paul.⁹ Third, he tells stories which may concern the villains of official tradition. Take for example, the figure of Simon the mystic, who was supposedly accompanied in his tours by the legendary Helen. Apparently, Simon was regarded suspiciously by the Church because some details of the miracles he performed were thought to parallel the acts of Jesus; this may be the reason why he does not appear in official texts. Simon's tale may or may not be based on true facts, but what is undeniable is that it sheds light on the conflicting versions of Christianity.¹⁰ And this is an example of truth of history.

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⁹ Kyrtatas 2020, 88-89.

¹⁰ Kyrtatas 2004, 10-11.

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