AIM AND ACHIEVEMENT IN HERODOTUS
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Herodotus compiled his magnum opus in fifth century B.C. Greece1. But the explicit purpose of the historian has a surprisingly modern ring. He intends to record for posterity "the remembrance of what men have done" and to analyse the causes of the conflict between Greek and Barbarian2. That is, he seeks to discover the facts, and interpret them, with particular emphasis on causation — aims that to us distinguish the historian from the casual narrator of events. It is the purpose of this paper to examine the History in view of this object and to discover whether Herodotus achieved his aims — how well did he discover his facts, how conscientiously did he interpret them, and how successful was he in analysing causes?

This impression of "modernity" emerges clearly from the text. But the text also reveals severe limitations to this impression. Herodotus never systematized his approach, nor applied his methods continuously and consistently. Unlike Thucydides, Herodotus nowhere states his sources3; we are left with the more difficult process of inferring them indirectly. Basically, they fall into three groups — firstly, his own observations of natural phenomena and his own reading of written sources4; secondly, informed oral sources other than eyewitnesses; and thirdly, eyewitnesses themselves. But he had no defined, consistent notion of the relative merits of these sources. Paramount to him were his own researches and observations, and Herodotus seems to have been supremely satisfied with his own efforts. We learn that he noticed things about the Persians that they never knew, and he affirms his mistaken observations by the statement "Thus much I can declare of the Persians with entire certainty, from my own actual knowledge." But this personal guarantee can be deceptive — often it takes the form of underwriting material gained (probably with some inconvenience to Herodotus) from other oral sources, with the implication that the account should be given as much weight as those obtained by his personal observations, because Herodotus took the trouble to hunt down the persons to give him the required information. Thus we learn in Book ii, ch. 44 that "in the wish to get the best information" on whether Hercules was originally a Greek or an Egyptian God, Herodotus visited an old temple of Hercules in Phoenicia. In a conversation with the priests he learned that the temple had been built many generations before the birth of the Greek Hercules. Thus, we are to believe, the Egyptian account is the more reliable because Herodotus took the trouble to investigate the matter thoroughly; it is, however, merely the repetition of Egyptian beliefs adopted uncritically from Egyptian priests.

Herodotus seems to have been vague about the differences in value between his own observations and his oral sources as reliable means of gathering evidence. Certainly he could make a distinction in kind between the two sources6, but nowhere explicitly in value; should we attempt to find this in the text we are left to doubtful inference. At ii, 98 Herodotus gives geographical details about Egypt gained by his own unaided researches, and in the next chapter writes on Egyptian history drawn from "the accounts given me by the Egyptians,
which I shall now repeat, adding thereto some particulars which fell under my notice”, i.e. it could be maintained that he found it necessary to subsidize his oral sources by his own researches. But it is the only case of its kind, and Herodotus was not necessarily thinking that oral sources are, on the whole, deficient and always needing outside verification.

This failure to classify his sources according to merit involved Herodotus in unnecessary textual inconsistencies. In the second book, for example, he noticed that the Egyptians shaved their heads and beards (ii, 36), but in the same book repeats the myth surrounding the thief of King Rhampsinitus’ fortune, and states that the thief “shaved off the right side of the soldiers’ beards” (ii, 121).

Nor can we determine exactly what value Herodotus gave to the testimony of eyewitnesses; once again unlike Thucydides, he never clarified his attitude, and we must doubt that he ever consciously considered the problem. It does not help greatly to infer that he must have relied heavily on eyewitnesses for his account of the Greco-Persian wars, because he promises to repeat faithfully whatever he heard (ii, 123; vii, 152), avoiding judgement on the material and therefore by implication on the value of the source. Herodotus seems to have preferred his own observations to those of eyewitnesses, using eyewitness accounts only when he could not be there himself, but often we see an uncritical adoption of eyewitness accounts where his own enquiries about natural phenomena should have made him cautious — the story of the Persians shipwrecked off Athos being devoured by sea-monsters would certainly, in his own terms, have warranted sceptical treatment (vi, 44).

Herodotus, then, seems incipiently aware of the problems of collecting evidence, and even (in at least one example) aware that different sources have different relative values. But this realization remains incipient; his criteria are not formulated explicitly, and certainly not rigorously applied. The same basic pattern emerges in his approach to the judgement of the evidence gained. He was not blind to his responsibility as a historian to judge and weigh the evidence before presentation; in following the Persian account of the rise of Cyrus and his conquest of Asia, he rejected the three alternative stories that he knows (i, 95); he was doubtful of the truth of the story that a male Persian is never buried until he has been torn by either dog or bird, so speaks of it “with reserve and not openly” (i, 140); while his discussions of the reasons why the Nile rises in summer and falls in winter show considerable skill in scientific judgement (ii, 19f.). Moreover, the bases of his judgement were usually rational — he sought natural reasons for historical phenomena to replace the mythical or supernatual explanations usually advanced. In tracing the advent of the Scythians, he rejected the native account of the selection of the first king from the three sons of the original inhabitant Targitais (iv, 5-7), the Greek account claiming the three sons to be those of Hercules, begot while he was in search of his mares on the plains of Scythia (iv, 8-10), and opted for the story which traces the origins of the Scythians to a wandering tribe displaced from Asia (iv, 11). But there is no sustained criticism of the stories and events he recounts; this seems to have been precluded by his criteria for examining evidence, the deficiencies of which are particularly glaring in his treatment of myths and miracles. Bury has pointed out that his rational scepticism was not directed towards myths in general, but towards the physically and empirically impossible in myths. He cannot accept a “silly fable” about Hercules, which makes him an attempted victim of an Egyptian sacrifice, because he knows that the Egyptians refused to sacrifice animals, least of all
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men (ii, 45); nor could he believe that two statues would fall to their knees (v, 86) — such stories run counter to both his knowledge and his common-sense.

But this criteria left him in obvious difficulties — how was he to treat myths and legends which, while highly improbable, do not contradict ordinary experience or physical possibility? Here Herodotus chooses to suspend judgement, to repeat the various accounts for the reader's consideration, and to rationalise this as a legitimate device of the historian: he promises to repeat whatever comes to his attention as service to his readers. Thus in ii, 123 "... I propose to myself, throughout my work, faithfully to record the traditions of the several nations"; in vii, 152 "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 the whole of my history." Responsibility for the stories is carefully avoided: Egyptian priests take the credit for the story that Pheron was struck by blindness because "in a spirit of impious violence" he hurled his spear into a flood (ii, 111), and "it is reported" that a group of Amazons slayed their male Greek captors (vi, 110). Where contrary but credible accounts are available, both are repeated for good measure — the differing versions of the origins of the Lacedaemonian laws (i, 65), of the fate of the Lacedaemonian vase sent to Croesus as a symbol of friendship (i, 70), and of the relations between Drioens and Crotona in the war against the Sybarites (v, 44-5). Herodotus found himself in a dilemma; his attempted solution only resulted in the temporary, and often prolonged, abdication of the historian's vital role — the evaluation and criticism of evidence. Perhaps more deliberate formulation of criteria, and a more rational scientific basis for these criteria, would have avoided the problem. Such a basis may, for instance, have allowed him to treat the divine and the supernatural not as objective forces working externally on human events and actions, but as subjective forces psychologically influencing the direction of human energies; this alone would have made some of the evasions noted above unnecessary.

Once again, therefore, we can see the two concurrent but divergent elements in Herodotus' method: he is aware of the particular method needed for a specific historical problem, but he either unconsciously or deliberately suspends the use of that method because his criteria are ill-formed or deficient. But our criticism must be more severe on Herodotus' approach to relevance in his presentation; here he erred more seriously from his own standards with correspondingly serious effects on his history. Relevance, to us, presupposes a theme or argument around which the narrative is shaped; the theme of the History is clearly the rise of the Persian Empire and its relations with subject states, and the subsequent political and cultural clash between Persia and Greece. The text in many places demonstrates Herodotus' at least embryonic recognition of the need for relevance in history writing. During his discussions of the career of Cyrus, Herodotus digressed briefly to refer to the customs of the Persians, at the end of which he bluntly states "I return to my former narrative." (i, 140) Later in Book One, in the chapters concerned with the Babylonian system of defence (this was relevant because it allowed the city to withstand a Persian siege) Herodotus attempted to evaluate Nicotris' contribution to these defences. Here he notes two facts — Nicotris "not only left behind her, as memorials of her occupancy of the throne, the works which I shall presently describe, but also, observing the great and restless enterprise of the Medes, who had taken so large a number of cities, and among them Nineveh, and expecting to be attacked in return, made all possible exertions to increase the defences of her empire." (i, 185).
first feature of her rule is obviously outside his theme, and Herodotus, realizing this, continued in this chapter to discuss only Nicotris' defence measures. But Herodotus could not, at any time, resist referring to the structural achievements of his historic characters — these he conceived as physical monuments perpetuating the glory and traditions of the ruler who built them. So the next chapter is devoted to discussing another of Nicotris' undertakings which, Herodotus states, was "a mere by-work compared with those we have already mentioned." (i, 186). Herodotus is, then, writing compulsively, fully aware that the digression is unnecessary and irrelevant.

The notion of relevance is not articulated in the History, but there is sufficient evidence in the text to conclude that he was conscious of its necessity while unable to sustain its use in practice. The writer's geographical excurses, it is true, follow a deliberate pattern, which perhaps suggests that these digressions do not contradict his criteria; every time a new country is introduced into the political discussion, its physical features are described. The description may be as brief as the sentence on the river Halys in the first book (i, 6), or as long as the discussion on Egypt occupying nearly the whole of the second book (ii, 1f.). Simply, Herodotus had a different view from the modern historian of the possible scope of a work like the History, albeit that its primary and express purpose was purely historical. He felt that this historical purpose did not preclude him from treating geographical phenomena independent of this purpose. The essential point to make here, then, is that these geographical excurses do not necessarily allow us to infer that there is an appreciable gulf between Herodotus' intentions and his achievement.

But his irrelevance in other fields does become a symptom of limited criteria. Herodotus is notorious for his attraction toward the marvellous and monumental, both in nature and human deeds and constructional achievements. This attraction was so basic to his thought that it became for him an alternative means of judging the historically relevant or significant. This operated in two ways. Firstly, as a criterion for excluding material from the narrative — Gyges was dismissed as being unimportant because "he did not perform a single noble exploit" after his conquest of Colophon (i, 14). Secondly, as a criterion for including material — Nicotris' place in the narrative was undoubtedly due in part to those achievements which were beyond what was necessary for the defence of Babylon. The danger here lies in the marvellous and monumental operating as substitutes for, and not merely supplements to, the strict test of cause or consequence which Herodotus dimly realised and which we stringently apply. It was marvellous, but not really relevant, that during the taking of Sardis Croesus' son spoke for the first time (i, 85), and it was of little significance to Harpagus' conquests that the priestess of Minerva grew a beard whenever danger approached the Pedasians (i, 175). To Herodotus, his extended account of Egypt was justifiable "because there is no country that has so many wonders nor any that has such a number of works which defy description" (ii, 35). That is, the discourse is included for its own intrinsic worth, and not because it is in any way pertinent to his theme.

It could be argued, however, that the allowances we made in connection with Herodotus' geographical observations should be extended to cover all his excurses and digressions. We would need to say, then, that Herodotus had different ideas about what is relevant or admissible in history writing; and we could not impugn him for consistency with his own ideas. This broader notion of relevance would have three features: firstly, that which is relevant in the context of cause and effect; secondly, such things as marvels and monu-
ments which are intrinsically worthy of mention; and thirdly, anything that has potential audience value. But there are difficulties with this argument. Firstly, it is doubtful if Herodotus effectively separated in his mind the causally relevant and the marvellous. As I indicated earlier, the latter could become a substitute for the former, seriously distorting, naturally, Herodotus' interpretation of an event. One feels that Gyges was excluded rather because he did no more “monumental” deeds after Colophon than because he no longer operated as a relevant factor in Lydian consolidation; Rawlinson, moreover, in a footnote to i, 214 of his translation, points out that Herodotus' bloody account of the fate of Croesus was probably far from the truth, and that “unwittingly Herodotus was drawn towards the more romantic and poetic version of each story, and what he admired most seemed the likeliest to be true.” It is not necessary for us, then, to criticize Herodotus' ideas about relevance. The problem lies with the effect of the vagueness of these ideas on his historical judgements, and the difficulties of interpretation into which this vagueness led him; had Herodotus formulated his methods as systematically as the above argument assumes, then perhaps he could have avoided the confusion which arose from one blurring into the other.

And secondly, flashy entertainment was not one of Herodotus' original aims. Thucydides cryptically noted, no doubt with Herodotus in mind, that his History of the Peloponnesian War was not written as “an essay which is written to win the applause of the moment, but as a possession for all time” (i, 22).

So far, then, the text has indicated poorly developed criteria, characterised by ill-formed notions of the relative value of sources, by a pseudo-rational attitude to organizing and judging evidence, and by a shallow approach to relevance that replaces the causally important with the spectacular. In addition — and perhaps because of their inadequate formulation — Herodotus was sporadic and inconsistent in following these criteria; taken together, these weaknesses in conception and application of methods left serious lacunae in the text. The problem remains to explain why these criteria were so vague and why Herodotus applied them so selectively. I believe that tentative explanations can be found by examining Herodotus' idea of history.

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To Herodotus, history has a definite process; there are patterns to be perceived in the course of events which make the facts that the historian collects and elaborates intelligible. The process is simple, universal, and irrefutable. The basic human element in history is greed for power, wealth and dominance; the basic element of the deity is jealousy of human greatness. The two factors, as Cochrane notes, are in inevitable conflict, the principle of expansion acting as a principle of limitation, generating opposition proportionate to the pressure exerted. The system of balance is divine and automatic — once the pendulum swings in one direction, it must swing the same distance in the other; the fate cannot be prevented. Herodotus' task as a historian, therefore, was simply to perceive the working of this system in human history. It did not require highly refined criteria, nor consistent application of these criteria, to discover three factors in the career of a person or nation — the motive of aggrandizement, the ever-heightening achievement of that aim, and the eventual decline from that position of eminence; nor a rational scientific mind to impose on these elements the connecting links of Herodotean cosmology. Depicting Croesus' fate (i, 34) as the divine compensation for Gyges' ungodly rise to power (i, 13) saved a complex analysis of character, motives and the prevailing political and international relations.
The limitations this cosmology placed on Herodotus as a historian can, perhaps, best be realised by examining his concept of the causes of war.\(^2\) Deeds of violence, including war, could be explained, he believed, by outlining the justification offered by the aggressor, which was usually a counter-claim of prior violence. At the beginning of the first book, Herodotus rejects the heavily mythical account offered by the Persians of the reasons for the Greco-Persian wars, which alleges justification in prior wrongs (i, 1-5), but he does not reject the assumption that the wars could be explained by this "theory of retribution" — he promises to "proceed at once to point out the person who first within my knowledge inflicted injury on the Greeks" (i, 5).\(^2\)

The analysis which finds the relations between man and gods to be governed by the principle of retribution or compensation is thus being applied to the secular relations between man and man. The demands of this crude notion of causation are few and slight: tradition and eyewitnesses could inform the historian of ancient quarrels and conflicts, or of the reasons and pretexts advanced by the warring nations. He does not need to expand his sources to get behind pretexts and discover motives, nor adopt a more critical attitude to the information received, nor prevent his judgement being diverted by the magnetism of the spectacular; so long as it does not make too great a travesty of possibility, and so long as it does not contradict his preconceived ideas of causation, the evidence is acceptable.

It may be charged that we have required Herodotus to proceed by such standards as we may care to erect — standards that were probably unfamiliar to him, and that he probably would have rejected as intellectually insufficient had he known about them. But any problem of evaluation implies a system of values that can be set against a writer’s methods, and it may be fairly safely assumed that the sort of demands we are here making on the historian are neither controversial nor merely ephemeral fashions in interpretative method. Indeed, it has been one of the themes of this paper to point out that these values — concerning the gathering, evaluation, and presentation of evidence — are tacitly affirmed by Herodotus himself (even while he fell short of them in practice) and explicitly stated by his contemporary Thucydides. These values are, then, those which emerge from the internal structure of Herodotus’ *History*, and not merely those which we may randomly select and arbitrarily impose on the work from outside; that these standards are those which we assume to be basic to the modern historian’s researches gives the problem of investigating Herodotus’ approach added significance.

**NOTES—**

2. See the Preface to the *History*.
3. Thucydides *The History of the Peloponnesian War* trans. R. Crawley, Everyman’s Library. London, 1961. Book I, chap. 22: “... with reference to the narrative of events, far from permitting myself to derive it from the first source that came to hand, I did not even trust my own impressions, but it rests partly on what I saw myself, partly on what others saw for me, the accuracy of the report being always tried by the most severe and detailed tests possible.” Thucydides clearly distinguished between, and understood the relative merits of his different sources.
4. But he was hampered by language problems — see ii, 125 for his inability to read the inscription on the Egyptian pyramid.
5. i, 139-140. He erroneously believed that all Persian names ended in “s.” See also ii, 5.
6. See for example ii, 147 where Herodotus distinguishes between oral sources and his “own observations.”
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9. Particularly true on geography — see e.g. iv, 16.
10. J. B. Bury The Ancient Greek Historians New York, 1958. This he holds to be generally true, but illustrates the "ill-defined limits of his faith" by a skilful discussion of the deliverance of the Delphic oracle from the Persians in vii, 86-9, where Herodotus considered a merely improbable physical coincidence to be more marvellous than a physical impossibility.
11. See also ii, 100; iv, 193, 195.
12. See also iii, 32, 45, 120-1.
14. See the Preface to the History. H. R. Immerwahr "Ergon: History as a Monument in Herodotus and Thucydides" American Journal of Philology vol. lxxxi, 1960, concludes that "the Herodotean view is based on visible remains, is restricted to specific audiences, and posits achievement as a representation of personality and as embodying fixed standards of praise." p. 296.
15. See also v, 55-62 — Herodotus consciously corrects himself after a long digression.
16. See also i, 110, 142, 176f.; iii, 98f.; iv, 11, 16-18.
17. See e.g. i, 68f., 85, 73, 114.
18. To Herodotus, at its peak of expansion in the Persian Empire in the fifth century — see Xerxes' speech at vii, 8.
19. i, 32 "... the power above us is full of jealousy, and fond of troubling our lot"; iii, 40 Amasis to Polycrates, "It is a pleasure to hear a friend and ally prosperous, but thy prosperity does not cause me joy, for as much as I know that the Gods are envious." vii, 10, "Seest thou how God with his lightning smites always the bigger animals, and will not suffer them to wax insolent while those of a lesser bulk chafe him not? How likewise his bolts fall ever on the highest houses and the tallest trees? So plainly does he love to bring down everything that exalts itself. Thus oftentimes a mighty host is discomfited when God in his jealousy sends fear or storm from heaven, and they perish in a way unworthy of them." See also vii, 46, 49.
21. i, 16 "... verily 'tis the worst of all human ills to abound in knowledge and yet have no power over action.
23. See also i, 73; iii, 1f., 47; v, 82. Cf. Thucydides, who distinguished between mere "grounds of complaint and points of difference" (causes to Herodotus) and the "real cause" — usually a power struggle. (i, 23).