

REVIEW

HERODOTUS ON PERSIAN AND EGYPTIAN RELIGION

Andreas Schwab, *Fremde Religion in Herodots Historien. Religiöse Mehrdimensionalität bei Persern und Ägyptern*. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2020. Pp. 307. Paperback, €49.00. ISBN 978-3-515-12720-2.

Engaging with the plurality of religions and cultures is a challenge of the modern world, Schwab reminds us at the start of his new monograph, as well as of the ancient one. His central argument is that in order to engage fully with this religious plurality within the text of Herodotus' *Histories*, a multidimensional approach is necessary. Schwab goes on to set out a framework for such an approach over the course of this book, which at its core involves thinking beyond issues of faith, ritual, and gods, and instead considering religion as fully embedded within, and completely inextricable from, wider society. The book is a revised version of the author's Habilitation thesis, submitted in Heidelberg in 2016/17.

In his introductory chapter, Schwab sets out his stall. The chapter includes a brief overview of previous research, focusing on key works by Harrison and Mikalson to characterise how scholarship has so far approached Herodotus and religion; as well as on work by Mora, Chiai, and Burkert on the more specific topic of Herodotus' treatment of non-Greek religion.¹ Schwab identifies wider scholarly trends which have, in recent decades, pointed out that the very idea of 'religion' is an abstraction, and that the conceptual separation of religion from other areas of human experience is not only artificial but also often a product of modern scholarship. He also acknowledges that scholars of Greek antiquity have already highlighted the lack of an ancient Greek term corresponding to the modern word 'religion'; and that this, as already well established in the field, should inform how we study the topic. Perceptions and practices that we might label as 'religious' are deeply enmeshed with elements of human experience that we would label today as

¹ See W. Burkert, *Griechische Religion der archaischen und klassischen Epoche* (Stuttgart and Berlin, 1977); F. Mora, *Religione e religioni nelle Storie di Erodoto* (Milan, 1985); and G. F. Chiai, 'Wie man von fremden Göttern erzählt: Herodot und der allmächtige Gott in den anderen Religionen', in E. Irwin, K. Guess, and T. Poiss, edd., *Wege des Erzählers: Logos und Topos in den Historien* (Frankfurt am Main and Berlin, 2013) 47–74.

‘secular’—the social, the cultural, the political, the economic, and the religious are, in Greek antiquity, inseparable. Schwab uses the term ‘multidimensional religion’ to capture this complexity, deploying it in a roughly comparable way to the phrase ‘embedded religion’ preferred by scholars including Bremmer, Eidinow, and Rüpke. The chapter is rounded off with an explanation why Schwab pays particular attention in this book to Herodotus’ portrayal of Egyptian religion (because the material for discussion is especially rich), and a summary of the book’s structure.

The second chapter expands on Schwab’s central argument, offering concrete examples to illustrate why an approach that goes beyond ‘belief, ritual, and gods’ is helpful. With an in-depth discussion of the story of Mykerinos and his mysterious cow (Hdt. 2.129–32), Schwab illustrates how issues relating to religion can be found in passages of the *Histories* beyond those dedicated explicitly to describing culture and religion—i.e., beyond passages recounting *nomoi*. This is followed by an analysis of the section of the *Histories* devoted to the Persian *nomoi* (Hdt 1.131–40), demonstrating how this passage contains wider discussion of social and geographic significance beyond a description of gods and rituals. This chapter therefore is an extended argument for why a broader approach to Herodotus’ engagement with religion is needed—specifically, Schwab’s multidimensional approach.

The structuring framework for this multidimensional approach lies on five parallel threads, each of which forms the basis for one of the subsequent chapters. The five threads are: religion and its relationship to social structures and actions (Chapter 3); religion as understood through geography and space (Chapter 4); religion and temporality (Chapter 5); religion, psychological experience, and the senses (Chapter 6); and finally, comparative cultural perspectives on different religious systems (Chapter 7).

The third chapter is the first of Schwab’s substantive chapters, and explores how Herodotus presents religion as fundamentally entangled with society and the social order in Egypt. It reflects first on Herodotus’ depictions of purification practices and of priests as a social group, before offering close readings of a selection of passages where Herodotus describes the entwined nature of social interactions and religious activities in relation to festivals in Bubastis and Papremis, as well as mortuary ritual. The fourth chapter shifts focus from social space to geographic space. Examples from this chapter include a discussion of Herodotus’ treatment of the geographic foci of Egyptian religion—not only cities such as Memphis, Thebes, and Heliopolis, but also the Nile as a conceptual and symbolic *topos*; and also a consideration of how Herodotus represents local and regional variation in sacrificial practices. Chapter 5 examines the historical interest that Herodotus takes in Egyptian religion, in particular the attention he paid to the deep antiquity of Egyptian religion. Herodotus’ depiction of Egyptian conceptions of time and temporality are explored, including genealogy and the distinction between

mythical and historical time. Also explored is Herodotus' depiction of change in Egyptian religion, in particular as effected by kings such as Rhampsinitos, Cheops, and Mykerinos. The sixth chapter turns to the sensational, exploring notions of visuality and wonder, before considering Herodotus' depictions of other forms of religious experience with a particular focus on dreams.

Chapter 7, the final substantive chapter, considers how Herodotus portrays religious encounters, reflecting more directly on the central theme of Schwab's book of cultural and religious plurality. The chapter starts with a discussion of the idea of Egyptians as being culturally conservative, hostile to new cultural influences and in particular to religious novelties. Partly because of the strength of this principle, the Herodotean portrayal of religious encounters in Egypt is rendered all the more potent. As well as a range of other, briefer examples, Schwab explores in particular the depiction of the Persian king Cambyses, whose disastrous religious misunderstandings famously included the desecration of the Egyptian cult of Apis and the killing of the Apis bull. Schwab also draws our attention to a passage of the *Histories* where the Persian king Darius reflects on the different customs and *nomoi* of different peoples, in a meta-commentary on Herodotus' own historical practice (Hdt. 3.38). The passage highlights the hermeneutic difficulties in understanding the religious systems, perceptions, and imaginations of others, difficulties that are illustrated—as Schwab demonstrates through the examples presented in this chapter—again and again within the text of the *Histories*. The final chapter offers a summary of the book as a whole.

Schwab's book offers much food for thought, both through its wider reflections and in its rich close readings of passages of the *Histories*. While the idea of adopting a multidimensional approach to religion is not in itself new (as Schwab himself acknowledges), the framework that Schwab establishes for such an approach is valuable. The five threads he has identified—the social, the geographic, the temporal, the sensory, and the comparative—each add something distinct and important to our understanding of religion as an embedded field of human experience. This framework is therefore helpful for thinking about Greek religion in general, as well as for thinking about religion within the text of Herodotus' *Histories*. It is a framework that could be applied much more extensively beyond 'foreign' religion, or to understand religious plurality.

A separate contribution concerns Herodotus' engagement with religious or cultural plurality, or with the idea of 'foreignness'. At several points through the book, Schwab highlights the typically Herodotean practice of shifting perspectives—offering, for example, not only a typical Persian and a typical Egyptian perspective on the killing of the Apis bull, but also the imagined personal perspective of Cambyses himself, conditioned by childhood trauma. Schwab identifies this deliberate attention to multiple viewpoints, often using different internal voices as distinct from the authorial voice, as a key means by

which Herodotus both represents and also seeks to comprehend religious plurality. Schwab illustrates this narrative multivocality elegantly with the use of examples, in particular in Chapters 2 and 7. Indeed, such multivocality is deployed across the *Histories* to explore cultural plurality and ambiguity in a range of contexts, not just those which might be considered religious (notably, for example, in the prologue to reflect on varying conceptions of historical causation). It would therefore have been interesting had the relationship between multivocality and cultural plurality been explored in more detail in this book, beyond the sphere of religion, perhaps including a deeper engagement with the research elsewhere in Herodotean studies on narratology and authorial interjection.

Further discussion would also have been helpful in the concluding chapter, to bring together the various themes of the book. It would have been particularly interesting to relate the multidimensional approach to religion more closely with the ideas of alterity and ‘foreignness’, reflecting back on the significance of ‘foreign religion’ (*fremde Religion*) as specified in the title. Indeed, a closer interrogation of precisely what is meant by ‘foreign’ in a Herodotean context would have been welcome, comparable to the analysis of the term ‘religion’ in the introduction. Notwithstanding the scope that remains for further discussion and reflection, the book remains useful especially for Schwab’s practical framework for undertaking a multidimensional approach, and the enjoyable close readings of individual passages.

Universität Wien

NAOÍSE MAC SWEENEY
naoise.macsweeney@univie.ac.at