

## REVIEW

### ESSAYS ON HERODOTUS AND ETHNICITY

Thomas Figueira and Carmen Soares, edd., *Ethnicity and Identity in Herodotus*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2020. Pp. x + 341. Hardback, \$190.00 (Paperback ed. published 2022). ISBN 978-1-138-63111-3.

This is a rich and rewarding volume with insightful contributions by a wide variety of scholars. It stresses especially the collaboration of English- and Portuguese-speaking scholars, with its origins in the Celtic Conference in Classics in Dublin in 2016. Thus one of the more striking chapters is by Carmen Soares on the early modern accounts of discoveries in Brazil as influenced by the early scientific methods of Herodotus; another is by Rogério Sousa, Egyptologist at Lisbon. Overall, it is a refreshing and thought-provoking collection, though it must be said that it could be sharpened by more theoretical discussion of ethnicity and identity in general, and on the other hand, closer engagement with Herodotean scholarship. Some contributors discuss the Herodotean text as a straight mirror to the ethnicity or identity of the group, others attempt a more historiographical reading of Herodotus in dialogue with what might be considered the real-life identity of that group (e.g., Munson, Sousa, Gagné).

The volume is divided into rough topics, the first group by Rutgers scholars (Chs 1–4); from Chapter 7, we have with one exception (Gagné) the Portuguese-speaking scholars. I focus on some of the highlights.

Thomas Figueira's Introduction does not offer an overview of the subject of the volume, but rather attempts 'to provide some gauge in broad terms of the state of scholarship on ethnicity, ethnology and ethnography in general and specifically on Herodotus' (1). This can hardly be achieved in eight pages; what we do get, however, is a distinctive and personal view of certain trends in Herodotean scholarship and in treatments of ethnicity and identity in the wider classical world, mainly Greek. Figueira is concerned to emphasise the need for more nuance and 'conditioning' (by which he seems to mean the delineation of certain limits or conditions to broad generalisation). He flags the creation of Greek identity earlier than the Persian invasions, and the connection of ethnogenesis with the development of the polis—ethnic identity would be closely bound to membership of a polis, thus to a political identity that was more specific than a sharing of customs. Identity might be present earlier than its explicit statement in the sources, and he is critical, with

reason, of views of ethnogenesis as basically a ‘process of self-advertisement or propagandizing’ (2). He stresses well the element of family descent fundamental to citizenship in the Greek world. As for Herodotus, he was indeed an innovator, the first ethnographer, but with the complications of multiple viewpoints embedded in his text derived from multiple oral sources.

There are interesting points made here (see also Ch. 2), but for the all-important introduction to the notoriously complex topic of ethnicity, let alone Herodotus’ relation to it, many readers will wish for more development or explanation, and clearer, less compressed exposition, with clear definitions of the often contested terms involved in the topic of ethnic identity. The reader has to work hard: see, e.g., on the Spartans who had ‘deculturated non-acquiescent identity features among the Helots’ (2); ‘The lesson is ... that uttermost essence of otherness lies in ...’ (7). The author often refers to his other works for more detail, which perhaps explains this compression.

In Part I, Steven Brandwood (Ch. 1) examines the figure of interpreter in Herodotus, always marked, and sees the *histōr* as an enlarged and expanded interpreter who must go well beyond translation. What this means is examined in more depth in other chapters. The different nuances of *genos* and *ethnos* in Herodotus are treated by Brian Hill (Ch. 3); and Emily Allen-Hornblower (Ch. 4) looks at ethnicity through the lens of the emotions attributed to either each ethnic group, or individuals in that group. There is some over-simplification here, since Persian kings, for instance, may be categorically distinguished from the bulk of the Persians. The famous ‘experiment’ by Darius at 3.38, is a sign of Cambyses’ madness for Herodotus because he abused and ignored the customs of *other* peoples, not just his own customs as Allen-Hornblower puts it (‘No one but a madman goes against his own customs’, 84): the point here is that Cambyses has just abused the most sacred of Egyptian customs (3.37).

Figueira’s main chapter (Ch. 2) offers a rich and extended argument for the importance of language in ethnic identity generally in the Greek world, and well before the Persian Wars. Aiming in part at Jonathan Hall’s *Hellenicity*, he gives a useful summary of the evidence, and the remarks on Homer are particularly welcome: there is much to agree with here. I would add that Herodotus was capable of some irony or cynicism as well as Thucydides when it comes to claims of ethnic solidarity and ethnic identification. The famous remark defining ‘*to hellenikon*’ (Greekness) (8.144), is produced, it should be stressed, not as an authorial statement by Herodotus, but by the Athenians in a speech at a highly ambiguous point in the war: can it be that the strain of possible medism prompted an expansive attempt at definition by the Athenians in 480–79, or that Herodotus was mischievously letting his audience contrast the later Athenian behaviour of his own day? I would prefer to see claims to identity as extremely context-dependent, flexible, and endlessly dynamic (this is accepted by Figueira at p. 52, but apparently more for Thucydides than for Herodotus).

Of the treatments of Herodotus' barbarians, I would single out Sousa and Renaud Gagné in particular. Sousa's (Ch. 9) is one of the most exciting chapters, approaching Herodotus' Book 2 from the standpoint of considerable expertise in late period Egypt. He argues that across most of Egypt temples were particularly suspicious of foreigners in the wake of recent foreign domination, and Herodotus would have seen only the exteriors without any serious access to the areas of greatest religious importance. The exception was the more mixed town of Memphis, which was known to have many Greek-speakers. He makes a strong case for Herodotus getting more serious information from these Memphite priests (or crucially, intermediaries) and discusses ingeniously some elements which got 'lost in [cultural] translation' (207) and appear more or less puzzlingly in the *Histories*. I wished there were more acknowledgement of some of the problems perceived by Herodotean scholars, but equally would have liked more detail on the Egyptian sources alongside Herodotus (e.g., on the Egyptian religious beliefs which might have formed the kernel, along with much Greek interpretation, of Psammetichos' experiment on language)—and I hope he will write more on this. This was one of the few chapters which tackled markers of identity of a group of non-Greeks from the point of view of the non-Greeks rather than in purely Herodotean terms (as does Maria de Fátima Silva on the Persians as presented by Herodotus (Ch. 10)). Compare also Maria Do Céu Fialho's treatment of Helen in Egypt, in Book 2 (Ch. 12), where Herodotus purportedly offers the Egyptian view on Helen of Troy.

Gagné offers a fascinating study (Ch. 11) of 'Mirages of ethnicity and the distant north' in Book 4, with clear and illuminating discussion alongside, and in comparison with, other writers who treated this. The case of Aristeas' *Arimaspeia* enables him to show Herodotus' complex reworking and rethinking of the poet's tales using the methods of *historiē* to create the firmer platform of truthful knowledge, and separating the mere results of *akoē* about Issedones, Arimaspians, and Hyperboreans from firm objects of knowledge. He argues persuasively that this 'virtuoso' display of *historiē* tells us much about Greek attitudes to the frozen north. The comparison with Book 2, that other virtuoso display of up-to-date *historiē*, is striking, and leaves one with an enriched understanding of how Herodotus constructed his methods against the former authority of the poets. The ridicule of 'I laugh' (4.36) is echoed by the equally scornful discussion of others' theories about the Nile flood (2.20f).

Soares (Ch. 14) examines the way Herodotus' mode of scientific exposition was copied by three Portuguese writers of the sixteenth century recounting new descriptions of Brazil—one a Jesuit priest, one an administrator, one an explorer—and helped by the rare books section at Coimbra. This was fascinating and it would have been valuable to have more detail on these works. So yes indeed, the Herodotean combination of claims for history, autopsy, wonders, and the special character of a place are all nicely shown. If

anything, the Hippocratic preoccupation with food, fauna, and flora and health, airs, and waters, is even clearer, and one wonders if the Hippocratic criteria were in fact the more dominant in sixteenth-century humanism than Herodotean enquiry. Yet Sousa could go much further on the precision of detail in the ‘scientific method’ of Herodotus (cf. Gagné in Ch. 11), and more focus on the details of his text would take the analysis of his scientific mode into new areas: there surely needs to be more discussion of the idea of ‘proof’ and observational accuracy, and rationalisation of myth. The appearance of ἔλεγχον in 2.23, for instance, is highly significant in alluding to what is accessible to proof (see my *Herodotus in Context* (Cambridge, 2000) 168 for detail). There are several typos or instances of careless editing in the translations, thus one needs to check the Greek text carefully: e.g., it is not clear why the famous phrase in Herodotus’ Proem, ἱστορίας ἀπόδεξις ἦδε, is translated as ‘the results of the disclosure’, rather than ‘results of the enquiry’; ‘case’ is a typo for ‘cause’ (all on 311). Why is θαυμαστά, Herodotus’ central topic of ‘wonders’, preferred to the θαυμασά found in the usual texts? On p. 306, the translation of 2.5.1 about the Delta being a gift of the river, should read ‘new land’, not ‘new in land’ (for ἐπικτητός τε γῆ, literally ‘acquired land’).

Munson’s Chapter 6 is the main interlocutor of Herodotus as a ‘cultural relativist’, though of a special type (144), and there follows a profound and thoughtful analysis of the relative values of freedom in the different ethnic world views of Greek and Persian in Herodotus’ account. She focuses most productively on the Persian constitutional debate as a dialectical analysis of both ‘freedom’ and *nomos* (‘custom’), and the relation between the two (3.80–3). While most historians simply see this debate as a straight literary construction by Herodotus, her suggestion is attractive that the story of the debate circulated as some kind of believed event in the cultural ‘middle ground’ of Asia Minor, subject to multiple cultural ‘translations’ and mis-translations by Persians or Greeks in this intermediate area of interaction, and that the anachronism was already there for Herodotus to re-create again within his own interests. Somewhat related, Delfim Leão’s chapter (Ch. 13) on the Solon/Croesus exchange in Herodotus and then in later versions (Diodorus, Plutarch) sets out firmly and convincingly the universalism of the Herodotean (and Solonian) moral view, which contrasts with later authors’ emphasis on the stereotypical Greek-barbarian antithesis.

There are some editorial puzzles and the volume has a rather uneven editorial policy. I could not find the ‘detailed abstracts’ of the various contributions (7). Gregory Nagy’s Chapter 5 is presented in the form of dialogue with an already published essay. The mode of giving a Greek work and its translation without intervening punctuation is slightly misleading or distracting (and non Greek-readers should be alerted): e.g., for the famous passage on

Hellenic identity in Hdt. 8.144.2, ‘And again there is the *Hellenikon* “Greekness”, being *homaimon* “of the same blood” (4–5), where ‘*to Hellenikon*’ is the noun translated as ‘Greekness’. Despite these wrinkles, however, this is an important contribution to the growing volume of work on ethnicity and identity in the Greek classical period.

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