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REVIEW

HERODOTUS IN HIS INTELLECTUAL SETTING

K. Scarlett Kingsley, *Herodotus and the Presocratics: Inquiry and Intellectual Culture in the Fifth Century BCE*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024. Pp. xii + 258. Hardback, £85.00. ISBN 978-1-009-33854-7.

Locating Herodotus within the intellectual culture of the fifth century is a challenging task. With the conspicuous (and occasional) exception of his predecessor Hecataeus, Herodotus is not inclined to identify his intellectual interlocutors by name, even when happily mocking the geographical ignorance of his fellow Greeks. Another complicating factor is the uncertainty concerning the time(s) and method(s) of Herodotus' own 'publication', whether in public lectures, agonistic debates, or writing. Moreover, one of the most important intellectual developments of the fifth century, the Sophistic movement, is notoriously difficult to define and evaluate, for various reasons: the hostile reception of Plato and Aristotle, the scanty remains of Sophistic writings, and the often disputed meaning of such scraps as do survive (for example, Protagoras' 'Man is the measure' doctrine).

Previous attempts to situate Herodotus in his contemporary cultural landscape include the work of Charles Fornara and Rosalind Thomas.[1] Fornara detected tragic influence in Herodotus' ironic partial portraits of subjects (including the growth of Athenian power) that culminated in a moment of great but short-lived success: 'Precisely as the audiences of Aeschylus and Sophocles were intended to form their conclusions without the explicit aid of the playwright, so does Herodotus demand or expect an involved audience participating in and judging what is evoked before them'.[2] By contrast, Thomas focused not on historical narrative but on Herodotean ethnography, geography, and accounts of natural wonders, where she identified thematic and formal features—topics, persuasive and polemical techniques, methods of argumentation—also found in the works of medical writers, sophists, and natural scientists. For her part Professor Kingsley focuses

[1] C Fornara, *Herodotus: An Interpretative Essay* (Oxford, 1971); R. Thomas, *Herodotus in Context: Ethnography, Science and the Art of Persuasion* (Cambridge, 2002). See also M. Gagarin, *Antiphon the Athenian: Oratory, Law, and Justice in the Age of the Sophists* (Cambridge, 2002) 13–16.

[2] Fornara (1971) 61.

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primarily on historical narrative, where she finds persuasive evidence for Herodotus' interaction with various contemporary thinkers on such abstract 'philosophical' issues as relativism, human nature, ethics, and epistemology. In my view, this is a book that needed to be written, and Professor Kingsley has done an excellent job of doing so.

In a substantial introductory chapter Kingsley argues that Herodotus' fundamental innovation with regard to contemporary intellectual thought lies in illustrating 'the untapped force of historical narrative for working through philosophical questions' (9). This is demonstrated, on a small scale, by Solon's historically grounded advice to Croesus on ethics and man's place in the cosmos (1.31–2); and, at greater length, by the discussion of the dynamic *physis* of the Nile and its unique summertime flooding (2.19–27), staged as a Sophistic debate in which Herodotus rehearses the theories of his rivals before presenting his own. In its reliance upon an unseen factor (the river's wintertime evaporation) Herodotus' solution aligns him with thinkers who cite proofs beyond the realm of direct autopsy. Kingsley's discussion of genre theory helps to illuminate Herodotus' place in 'what will become the genre of historiography' (11). The ancient reception of the *Histories* informs the author's adoption of an 'evolutionary' theory of generic development, which emphasises Herodotus' relationships with other practitioners of *historiē*. Kingsley identifies three specific features of the *Histories* shared with contemporary philosophical texts: universalising tendencies, the study of origins, and the use of prose to cultivate a different kind of authority from that of the poetic Muses. In her discussion of terminological difficulties Kingsley justifies her use of the controversial label 'Presocratics' because of its familiarity, despite her awareness that Socrates may not be the transitional figure implied by the term, which in her usage embraces a broader class of thinkers (tragedians, comic poets, historians) than Diels acknowledges in his foundational edition.

The book's longest (second) chapter addresses the contribution made by Herodotus' treatment of *nomos* to the fifth-century debate on relativism, where the sophist Protagoras plays a central role, portrayed by Plato as espousing both subjective relativism (whatever an individual perceives is correct for that individual) and cultural relativism (a given society's traditional practices are valid for that community). For Kingsley Herodotus' complex attitude is encapsulated by the famous passage (3.38) in which Cambyses is deemed mad for disregarding national *nomoi*—a judgment confirmed by Darius' cross-cultural experiment in Greek and Indian burial customs, which neither community can be induced to abandon for any amount of money. 'Accordingly, in the process of an endorsement of cultural relativism, the *Histories* subtly critiques Persian subjectivism' (65).

The self-seeking Cambyses embodies the broad threat to communal *nomoi* (in Persia and elsewhere) posed by one-man rule and imperialism, themes

combined in Kingsley's innovative reading of the royal council at which Xerxes announces his intention to invade Greece (7.8–11). Kingsley argues that the *nomos* of national expansionism cited by Xerxes as his primary reason for the invasion 'is not socially constituted but imposed' (85), and constitutes another example of a Persian monarch (like Cambyses) who identifies *nomos* with his own will. (Similarly, when Atossa encourages Darius to invade Greece (3.134), she cites no national *nomos* of expansionism, but the king's need to demonstrate his manliness and forestall the revolt of his subjects.) Kingsley also challenges the common interpretation of Xerxes' dream as the divine manifestation of Persian imperialist *nomos*, reading it instead as the manifestation of the resentful deity feared by Artabanus, who allows no one but himself to 'think big'. Finally, Kingsley reads the confrontation between Xerxes and Artabanus, his uncle and advisor, through a Sophistic lens, as a recasting of the debate (familiar from Aristophanes' *Clouds*) between the young convention-defying *sophos* and an older figure who represents tradition. An intriguing take, to be sure—but should we then also detect Sophistic influence in Aeschylus' *Persae*, which pits the 'ancient' Darius, representative of the Persian monarchic tradition, against the young Xerxes in his foolish, disastrous departure from that tradition (lines 759–86)? More immediately persuasive is Kingsley's broader claim that Herodotus' dramatisation of this key historical and causal moment aligns him with 'a community of thinkers exploring the power of conventional versus subversive ethics' (90).

Chapter 3 focuses on speeches given by Persian conspirators before and after the coup that ends the reign of the false Smerdis. Kingsley understands these speeches to comprise a philosophical debate in which Darius' egoism (the belief that all action should be self-interested) is contrasted with the case made for cooperative action by Otanes and for truth-based altruism by Prexaspes. Darius' infamous defence of lying for profit (3.72), which contravenes a fundamental Persian *nomos*, evokes the controversy in contemporary discourse over advocating falsehood for gain—an issue addressed in Antiphon's *On Truth*, the Anonymus Iamblichi, and contemporary tragedy (especially Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, in the clash of views between Odysseus and Neoptolemus). In the Constitutional Debate that follows the death of the usurper (3.80–2), Otanes' endorsement of rule by the multitude (*plēthos*) and Darius' clinching counter-argument in favour of one-man rule illustrate the complex relationship between the individual and society in Persia. There are implications for Athenian politics as well, as the example of Themistocles (whose interest in self-aggrandisement does not always serve the interests of the state) demonstrates.

In Chapter 4, after surveying the evolving usage of the term *physis* in fifth-century Sophistic and philosophical works, Kingsley analyses in unprecedented detail its Herodotean application to humanity and the natural world

(especially Egypt), with 'predictive value for study of the past' (117). Herodotus' sophistic analysis of the Nile raises an issue of great contemporary interest, the relationship between humans and their natural habitat: Herodotus notes a correlation between the Egyptians' distinctive climate and river on the one hand, and their distinctive national habits (*ēthea*) and customs (*nomous*) on the other (2.35.2). Here Kingsley rightly contrasts the stronger emphasis on environmental determinism found in the Hippocratic *Airs Waters Places*, where differences in Asian and European landscapes are understood to produce different national physiques—physiques largely responsible for the outcome of the recently fought Greco-Persian Wars.[3] Herodotus' correction of the 'silly' Hellenic story of Heracles' mass killing of Egyptians (2.45) demonstrates his conception of human *physis* as a stable factor, undifferentiated through different cultures and eras, that enables him to interpret events that are remote in space and time. Kingsley also advances a novel reading of Cyrus' final advice to the Persians (9.122), urging them not to abandon their rugged homelands for more fertile territory, lest they become slaves rather than rulers. While some have understood this passage to reflect a kind of environmental determinism, for Kingsley Cyrus fears that becoming an agricultural people will prevent the growth of Persian imperialism. In other words, he envisions the effect that geography has on human *nomos* rather than human *physis*, in 'a metaphorical representation of the opposition of cultivation to imperialism, not a literal espousal of environmental determinism' (136).

In further analysis of Herodotean *physis*, Chapter 5 addresses the phenomenon of 'transhumanism', the possibility that under duress combatants might temporarily surpass their own innate *physis* as fighters. The most famous passage involving this phenomenon is the conversation between Xerxes and Demaratus after the Persians' crossing of the Hellespont (7.101–4). With supporting evidence from a theory of sight and aesthetics espoused by Gorgias in his *Encomium of Helen*, Kingsley interprets the Herodotean passage not as a victory for Spartan *nomos* over Persian *physis*, but as an exposition of different strategies for instilling the fear necessary to inspire soldiers to fight beyond their natural capacity—the Persian *nomos* of despotism as opposed to the despotism of Spartan military *nomos*. Although this exchange encourages Herodotus' audience to expect that the surpassing of *physis* will play an important causal role in the battles to come, this proves true only at Thermopylae, while the Greek victories at Salamis (where Themistocles' strikingly Sophistic speech envisions a transhumanism achieved by free choice rather than external compulsion) and Plataea are determined by superior Greek organisation and other factors. Kingsley discerns here implicit polemic against the view in *Airs*

[3] Cf. C. Chiasson, 'Scythian Androgyny and Environmental Determinism in Herodotus and the Hippocratic *περὶ ἀέρων ὑδάτων τόπων*', *SyllClass* 12 (2001) 33–73.

Waters Places that the Greeks' victory was due to their superior, environmentally determined national *physis*. In rejecting *physis* as the most important factor in the Greek victory, Herodotus aligns himself with thinkers (including Epicharmus, Democritus, and Protagoras) who note alternatives to *physis* in the context of manifesting or acquiring *aretē*, especially 'practice' (*meletē* or *praxis*).

In Chapter 6 Kingsley examines Herodotus' epistemic claims on truth, seeming, and likelihood as a key area of his engagement with fifth-century intellectual culture. Although in his proem Herodotus claims knowledge of Croesus' role in initiating East/West strife and of the transience of human prosperity, the scarcity of strong epistemic claims in the *Histories* as whole is underscored by the primary narrator's frequent first-person intrusions, which typically emphasise the difficulty of accurate reporting. Presocratic interest in the problem of attaining truth is reflected in the observations of Xenophanes, Parmenides, Empedocles, and Anaxagoras, among others; the questionable reliability of the senses in this search may find a Herodotean inflection in his preference among sources for first-hand autopsy over second-hand hearsay. Among Herodotus' rare claims of 'truthful' or 'reliable' reporting, even his repeated protestations of truth in 7.139 (the unpopular view that the Athenians were the saviours of Greece against Xerxes) are qualified as subjective and conditional. By contrast, Kingsley considers Herodotus' veridical use of the participle of the verb 'to be'—Solon's speaking 'what is' (sc. true) to Croesus (1.30.3), or the description of the Cyrus *logos* as the one 'that is' (sc. true) (1.95.1)—to represent a creative recasting of innovative Parmenidean practice. My immediate reaction is to reject this hypothesis as all too imaginative, given the discrepancy between Parmenides' critique of mortal perception and the fundamental importance of eyewitness (*opsis*), oral report (*akoē*), and judgment (*gnōmē*) in Herodotean *historiē*. I have no such reservations, however, regarding the author's conclusion that Herodotean epistemic reticence serves less to encourage readerly engagement and further inquiry than to instill in his readers 'a fallibilist view of the past as not fully knowable' (187).

In her final (seventh) chapter Kingsley traces the reception of the *Histories* in the *Dissoi Logoi*, an early-fourth-century text whose Sophistic cast is reflected in its use of antilogy and relativism, the doctrine of *kairos*, and other features. The extent to which certain ethnographic details in the *Dissoi Logoi* (e.g., tattooing among the Thracians, incest among the Persians) need be derived from Herodotus seems questionable to my mind. However, Kingsley is certainly right to detect a recasting of Hdt. 3.38 in the text's culminating argument for relativism (DK 90 B 2.18–19), which includes a first-person narratorial intrusion, a hypothetical experiment involving comparative 'unseemly and seemly' practices, and a clinching poetic quotation that recalls Pindar's '*Nomos*, king of all'. In a final summary of her argument Kingsley

asserts that Herodotus' sustained engagement with the work of contemporary intellectuals merits his recognition as a 'creative competitor in the Presocratic marketplace of ideas' (204).

In three brief appendices Kingsley argues (#1) against the view that Herodotus' text espouses cultural 'tolerance' (implying the existence of objectively correct and incorrect *nomoi*) rather than cultural relativism; cites (#2) tragic and Hippocratic evidence as well as the *Dissoi Logoi* to argue for broader reception of Protagorean relativism than is commonly recognised, and against the view that Protagoras alone among fifth-century Sophists embraced 'strong' relativism (whereby a statement is (in)correct relative to a given framework) as opposed to 'weak' relativism (acknowledging situational factors); and examines (#3) the extent to which self-referential claims to knowledge differ from truth claims—a topic that in my view deserves more extended treatment, which would include discussion of possible distinctions between *oida* and *epistamai* as verbs of knowing.[4]

In the foregoing summary I have raised few substantial objections to Kingsley's arguments for the simple reason that I find her theses generally convincing, and provocative in the best way even when not immediately persuasive. She makes her case for Herodotus' engagement with contemporary humanistic issues with clarity and elegance; she proposes inventive and stimulating new interpretations of several central passages in the *Histories*; she makes excellent use of previous scholarship, which she cites with due respect even when contesting its conclusions. Her book represents an important contribution to both Herodotean studies and our understanding of the intellectual culture of fifth-century Greece.

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[4] C. Dewald and R. V. Munson, *Herodotus: Histories Book I* (Cambridge, 2022) 193 on 1.5.4.