Herodotus and his sources of information

'General analyses and discussions on the Sources of Herodotus are disappointing and inconclusive; nor is the secret of this disappointment far to seek. The work is too large and complex, its parts are too diverse in character and origin, for generalizations . . . to be convincing. A critique and evaluation of the Sources to be satisfactory must be conducted on such a scale as to be exhaustive.' So wrote R.W. Macan in 1908, in the introduction to his invaluable commentary on the last three books. Inevitably my treatment will fall short of the standard thus indicated if it is to stay within the limits appropriate to a conference paper. Moreover, since Macan's time the gap between the study of Herodotus als Historiker and als Schriftsteller has widened. Meetings like this, bridging the gulf between specialisms - not just between classicists and ancient historians but also between scholars with interests strictly focussed on particular parts of of Herodotus' work - are greatly to be welcomed, and I was delighted by the invitation to join in, though I am well aware that I must venture onto debatable ground where the historians know their way around much better than I do.

I will state my conclusion at the outset. Herodotus' sources of information about the Persian Empire were heterogeneous and haphazard, and there is a large measure of speculative reconstruction in his combination of data of various provenance to create the vivid and memorable narrative which we all admire. Thucydides expresses this rather more bluntly when he contrasts his own approach to the writing of history with that of others more concerned to produce an ἁγώνισμα ἀπὸ παραχρήμα ἀκούειν, Herodotus being generally agreed to be the principal target of his criticism (1 22.2): τὰ δὲ ἔργα τῶν πραγμάτων ἐν τοῖς πολέμοις οὐκ ἦν τῶν παρατυχόντων πυρθανόμενος ἄξιον γράφειν, οὐδὲ ἦν ἐμοὶ ἐδόκει. Thucydides' statement of his own methodology is unimpeachable; but Herodotus ranges much further in both time and space, and if his standards of evidence had been as exacting as those set by Thucydides, he would never have got started. The confidence with which he presents his narrative ought to surprise us more than it does, as he traces the history of Persia far back to its Median origins. An air of authority is undoubtedly an important element in his success; but we ought to ask whether we are at times seduced by it into supposing that his sources of information were better, and his evaluation of them more rigorous, than can really have been the case.

It is instructive to consider his use of poetry. Though he occasionally makes reference to poets he does not exploit their evidence as systematically as we might have expected; for all his interest in Sparta, he makes no mention of Tyrtaeus or Alcman. The discrepancies between his account of the battle of Plataea and the remains of Simonides' elegiac narrative (P. Oxy. 2327), published in 1992, are disconcerting. 'Although it may seem likely that H. had heard, if not read, a major poem by the most renowned lyric poet of the fifth century, the fragments themselves offer no indisputable evidence that he did.


'Excepting van Herwerden no other editor has faced the textual and historical difficulties of Herodotus with so much courage and candour' (J.E. Powell, The History of Herodotus (Cambridge, 1939) 80 n.2).
Here, as elsewhere, we are left uncertain about H.'s methods' (M.A.Flower & J.Marincola, *Herodotus, Histories Book IX* (Cambridge, 2002) 19). We may find it surprising that he makes no reference to Simonides' celebration of that victory. We should of course bear in mind that though he may once have read or heard this poem, he might well have been unable to lay hands on a copy when he came to compose his account of Plataea. Whether or not people's memories were better in antiquity, they had to rely on them far more. (Similar considerations may explain why he makes less use of Aeschylus' *Persae* than we might have expected.) How far his account may depend on an inaccurate recollection of the text is an unanswerable question. 'In fonti poetiche di questo genere non era possibile scoprire informazioni interessanti o fededegne ignote alle fonti orali utilizzate da Erodoto' was David Asheri's verdict. At all events, Herodotus' attitude to what we might have supposed to be an essential source is unexpected.

However, rather surprisingly, one of Bacchylides' victory odes, brought to light a little over a century ago, appears to be Herodotus' main source for Croesus' fate at the fall of Sardis (1.86-7). The Persian conquest of Lydia brought the Greeks into direct contact with the Persians, and may be regarded as a watershed for Greek knowledge of the Persian Empire. My discussion here is very heavily indebted to two papers which are not as well known as they should be: W. Burkert, 'Das Ende des Kroisos. Vorstufen einer Herodoteischen Geschichtserzählung' in C.Schäublin (ed.), *Catalepton. Festschrift B.Wyss* (Basel, 1986) 4-15 (=Kleine Schriften vii (Göttingen, 2007) 117-27) and W.-H.Friedrich, 'Herodots erfinderische Mythenkritik: drei Beispiele' in *Gegenwärtige Vergangenheit. Studien zur antiken Literatur und ihrem Nachleben* (with a Preface by E.Heitsch, U.Schindel) (Göttingen, 1998) 22-59, esp. 38 -50 (written in the 1970s).

No Near Eastern source throws direct light on the end of Lydian independence and Croesus' fate. We have a remarkable illustration of the impression which the king's end made on the Greek world in a famous, much reproduced depiction of the king seated on a magnificent funeral pyre, on a red-figure amphora by Myson, dated c.490, and now in the Louvre. Croesus is labelled; robed and garlanded, he holds a libation vessel, and looks calm and contented. A servant, labelled *Euthumos*, is about to light the pyre. Such a historical scene is very unusual in vase painting; it was perhaps given contemporary relevance by the Ionian Revolt.

By way of exegesis we have Bacchylides, *Ode* 3, composed to celebrate Hieron's victory in 468 in the chariot race at the Olympic games. Like the vase-painter Bacchylides does something very unusual in taking from the recent past the myth which

---

is an almost invariable element in an epinikion. When Sardis fell to the Persians, he tells us (3. 22-62), the king did not wait to suffer slavery, but had a great pyre heaped up in his palace courtyard, and mounted it, accompanied by his wife and daughters. When it was burning, he prayed to Apollo, and the god responded to his appeal. While Zeus quenched the flames with a cloudburst, Apollo carried off Croesus and his daughters to the Hyperboreans' earthly paradise behind the North Wind, on account of the king's piety, because he was uniquely generous in his gifts to Delphi. In this paranormal rescue the demarcation of divine functions should be noted. Zeus acts in his regular role as controller of the weather, and the really miraculous element, which Bacchylides highlights as such, comes with Apollo’s intervention. Piety is rewarded, and a story of catastrophe ends in a joyful miracle.

To the historian the conclusion should be clear: after Croesus mounted the funeral pyre he was never seen again. There are many Near Eastern parallels for a ruler's self-immolation by fire when faced with defeat. (Hdt. 7.166-7 (Hamilcar at Himera); 7. 107.2, cf. 113.1; Thuc.1.98.1 (Boges at Eion); 1 Kings 16, 18 (Zimri); Ctesias FGrHist 688F 1, 23-8 (Sardanapallos); Strabo 14. 671 (pirate chief Zenicetus)). It would have been rational for Croesus to take this step when Persian victory appeared certain, rather than wait to see whether the victor's mercy might extend to a ruler who had waged aggressive war against Persia.

This is not of course the story which Herodotus tells; his account lacks the really miraculous element, translation under Apollo's auspices to the happy Hyperboreans. But this fundamental difference is linked with a divergence earlier in the narrative. In Herodotus not Croesus but Cyrus orders the pyre. Herodotus professes uncertainty about his motive (1.86.2): 'Perhaps he intended to make a magnificent offering to some god of his, or perhaps he had made a vow and wished to fulfil it, or maybe he had heard that Croesus was a god-fearing man, and set him on the pyre to see if any divine power would save him from being burnt alive'. The third possibility, because it comes last, makes the strongest impression, though this extraordinarily cruel experiment is not, as was noted in antiquity (see Nicolaus of Damascus FGrHist 90 F 68, 12), easily reconciled with Zoroastrian reverence for fire. It looks as if this hypothesis was devised in the light of the outcome. The alternative suggestions raise problems when Cyrus changes his mind; he ought not thus to abandon a project undertaken in honour of the gods without, at least, promising an equivalent or more valuable substitute. But Herodotus does not really believe in these alternatives; they serve to emphasise the main point, Cyrus' responsibility for the order.

Nor does Herodotus' description of the process leading to Cyrus' change of heart bear serious scrutiny. Croesus, consigned to the pyre, recalls his encounter with Solon, and excites Cyrus' curiosity by three times calling out 'Solon'. His account of his conversation with Solon leads Cyrus to regret his decision to incinerate him, but the fire has now got too strong a hold to be extinguished. Then, so the Lydians say (1.87.1), Croesus called upon Apollo, the sunny day darkened, and torrential rain put out the fire. Croesus' reputation for piety thus receives supernatural endorsement. There is no violation of natural law. It is the timing of the cloudburst that indicates divine
intervention, but the god responsible is not Zeus but Apollo. Heaven having shown that Croesus deserved to live, Cyrus gives him a home at the Persian court, where he survives to give advice to Cambyses. In his last appearance (3.36) we may see the influence of the story of the wise Ahiqar. But Herodotus has nothing to say about his death.6

Herodotus should not be supposed responsible for extending Croesus' life for 20 years beyond the fall of Sardis. Rumours that a greatly loved or admired figure has really survived despite official reports of his death – as with Nectanebos, Nero, the Saxon king Harold defeated at the battle of Hastings in 1066, Hitler, and Elvis Presley – often gain solidity with the passage of time. The circulation of such tales may be supposed to have persuaded Herodotus that Croesus must have survived the fall of Sardis. As a pensioner at the Persian court Croesus could be imagined exerting a quietly civilising influence on the new regime, introducing hardy pastoralists to luxury and court ceremonial. The seclusion of the king and those close to him, for the Greeks a typical feature of Oriental autocracies (cf. Hdt.1.99), would explain why no one ever saw him. Of course such extraordinarily magnanimous treatment of a defeated aggressor has political implications (which historians of the Persian Empire have not been slow to explore).

Herodotus' narrative thus rationalizes Bacchylides', and goes beyond it to account for stories of Croesus' survival. This more realistic outcome called for an earlier alteration, to avoid the anticlimax of a change in the weather frustrating the king's self-immolation. Croesus' escape requires another to pronounce the death-sentence, and this role naturally falls to the conqueror. But neither the motivation for Cyrus' original decision nor the process leading to his change of heart stands up to serious scrutiny. The reference to Lydian tradition (1.87.1 ἐνθαῦτα λέγεται ὑπὸ Λυδῶν) highlights a critical point in the narrative, and, since no other source is indicated, gives the impression that this account derives from a local informant. It is time to face a crucial issue in contemporary Herodotean scholarship.

There are very many of such apparent source-citations in Herodotus' work, particularly in the first two books, creating the impression of oral inquiry and a wide range of local informants who reproduce a local tradition, saga or legend; they provide a large part of the evidence for Herodotus' travels.7 This conception was seriously challenged by Detlev Fehling's 1971 study of Herodotus' source-citations (Die Quellenangaben bei Herodot. Studien zur Erzählkunst Herodots, Berlin), which offers strong arguments against taking such expressions at face-value. In Fehling's view they are a storyteller's devices, intended, in general, to give an appearance of reliability and confer authority, on occasion to justify the inclusion of interesting material for the truth of which Herodotus will not vouch. In its original form the book received few reviews,8 but it attracted much more attention with the publication of an English translation (Herodotus and his 'Sources': Citation, Citation,

6 See further S. West,'Croesus' second reprieve and other tales of the Persian court', CQ 53(2003), 416-37 (esp. 416-28).
7 Their value as evidence of course depends on the rather questionable assumption that Herodotus himself spoke with the informants cited in their homeland.
8 It was not recommended by J. Cobet, Gnomon 46 (1974), 737-46.
Invention and Narrative Art, Leeds, 1989), the translator having induced the author to elaborate and clarify his argument. Several scholars have attempted to refute or at any rate undermine Fehling’s case (most conspicuously W.K. Pritchett in The Liar School of Herodotus (Amsterdam, 1995) – a strange title, and Pritchett certainly underestimated the strength of scholarly support for Fehling), to my mind unsuccessfully. 9

The arguments with which Fehling presented this challenge to Jacoby’s view of Herodotus as a ‘scientific’ historian must by now be familiar to everyone involved in this conference. The case is strongest in the Aigyptios logos, in particular in the outline of the history of Egypt before it was re-opened to the Greeks under Psammetichus (2.99 – 144), where he repeatedly cites as his authority the priests of the temple of Hephaestus (i.e. Ptah) at Memphis and allows no scope for the hypothesis that he is simply cutting out one or more intermediaries who retailed material allegedly derived from local informants. 10 If we admit at least some of the difficulties which Fehling highlighted we are led to a better understanding of Herodotus’ narrative skill. Once this view of his source-citations is admitted as, at least in some cases, persuasive, we may look with a sceptical eye for other features which owe more to narrative art than to straightforward reportage, bearing in mind, in particular, that specific detail and exact figures contribute very significantly to verisimilitude (even if they are not entirely relevant).

The case of the 28-year period of Scythian rule in the Near East (1.103.3-106; 4. 1-4) well exemplifies the uncertainties which may be concealed by Herodotus’ confident skill in combining unrelated items of information, in this instance to provide motivation for Darius’ Scythian campaign. Here Darius’ desire to avenge ancient wrongs suffered by the Medes is presented as if there were no room for doubt, but can hardly have any basis

---

9 Having myself felt a certain satisfaction in membership of the multinational quartet against whom Pritchett launched his attack (the other three being Kimball Armayor, Fehling, and Hartog) I have often wondered why Prof. Bichler was not included; perhaps Pritchett regarded his work as less likely to corrupt the young since it was not available in English. For approaches more subtle than Pritchett’s see in particular R.L. Fowler, ‘Herodotus and his contemporaries’ JHS 116 (1996) 62-87, esp. 80-5; G. Shrimpton and K.M. Gillis in H. Shrimpton, History and Memory in Ancient Greece (Montreal, 1997), 229-65; N. Luraghi, ‘Local knowledge in Herodotus’ Histories’ in The Historian’s Craft in the Age of Herodotus ed. Luraghi (Oxford, 2001) 138-60. On invented sources cf. D.J.A. Ross, in Traditions of Heroic and Epic Poetry ed. A.T. Hatto (1980) 90-91: ‘In the Middle Ages the chansons de geste seem generally to have been accepted as having a basis of valid historical fact. Their authors not infrequently quote supposed historical sources in a rather vague and non-committal manner . . . These references to the history of “the deeds of the Franks” , and in particular to historical sources supposedly preserved in the royal monastery of St Denis or elsewhere, are a commonplace in the epics and are for the most part to be discounted as serious references to sources, but they do indicate a degree of supposed historicity which the composer expects his audience to accept’.

more solid than Herodotus' own speculation. The twin obligations of repaying favours and exacting revenge are central to his framework of historical explanation; reciprocity is fundamental to his view of the world. But Darius as a Persian had no interest in redressing the wrongs suffered by the Medes a century or more earlier, while the northern raiders who then spread terror and destruction throughout western Asia did not come from the North Pontic steppe (Herodotus' Scythia being defined by the Danube and the Don) but from further east. The combination of ideas reflects a Greek standpoint. Assyrian and Babylonian documents record recurrent invasions by the Gimirri and Iškuza (i.e. Cimmerians and Scythians) in the late 8th and early 7th centuries, but certainly do not suggest a period of Scythian hegemony. Herodotus' figure of 28 years perhaps reflects an idea of the period during which a man was regarded as fit to take part in such raids. Various items of information (or misinformation) are thus skilfully combined in accordance with Herodotus' own preconceptions, and presented with misleading assurance.¹¹

Growing up in Caria Herodotus must have absorbed some impressions of the Persian Empire from an early age, even if rather haphazardly. Sir John Myres begins his *Herodotus Father of History* (Oxford, 1953: 1) with a delightful description of a five-year-old Herodotus on the quay at Halicarnassus watching the return of Artemisia's battle fleet. 'The first call was for shore-boats to land the wounded. The face of the Queen-admiral was set and sad. He asked his mother "What did they fight each other for?" Even if Herodotus had not yet been born when Artemisia's contingent came home, his childhood would have been passed among people who had served in Xerxes' campaign or had thus lost fathers and husbands, sons and brothers. (Of course, our faith in the reliability of the veterans' recollections may be unsettled by H.'s report of the total eclipse that attended the army's departure from Sardis in spring 480 (7.37.2).) Local patriotism must be reflected in the prominence which he gives to Artemisia, memorably introduced at the conclusion of his grand catalogue of Xerxes' forces (7.99), where he makes an exception to his principle of not naming regional commanders.¹² Her wise advice before Salamis (8.68-9) includes the clearest echo of Aeschylus' *Persae* (728) to be found in his work; there are further honourable mentions at 8. 87-8; 93; 101-2; 107.

Artemisia's appearance makes it appropriate to consider the list of Xerxes' forces (7.61-99) as they assembled at Doriscus after the crossing of the Hellespont. This is a key passage for our evaluation of Herodotus' sources of information about the Persian Empire. Abundant ethnographic detail illustrates the theme that Xerxes brought all the


¹² Local patriotism is similarly apparent in his highlighting of Scylax of Caryanda (4.44.1) in connection with Darius' exploration of the Indus. Scylax wrote a biographical essay on Heracleides of Mylasa, who in 497 engineered an ambush which resulted in great losses for the Persians (5.121); he could have been an extremely useful source of information for Herodotus.
forces of his realm to bear on Greece (7.21.2 τι γὰρ ὁκ ἤγαγε ἐκ τῆς ἁσίς ἔθνος ἐπὶ τὴν Ἑλλάδα Ξέφερης; cf. 4.87.1 (Darius) ἤγε δὲ πάντα τῶν ἄρχε) This point has been questioned: would Xerxes really have wanted Arabs and Sudanese from the far south (69.2) and Libyans with primitive fire-hardened spears (71) (and the Mysians are not much better equipped (74.1))? Nor is it easy to believe that Indians brought chariots overland from the Punjab (86.1). 13Nothing is said about chariots in the account of the actual campaign, nor about the use of the lasso, a speciality of the nomad Sagartioi (85) and the only point in which Xerxes' cavalry have different equipment from the infantry. This catalogue is based on considerations other than military logic. Inflation of the figures obviously enhances the glory of the Greek victory.

Herodotus mentions scribes making a record of this muster (100.1), and it was long ago suggested that Herodotus had access to a document then drawn up. But no such official list would have included this wealth of graphic detail, which goes beyond what any eye witness could possibly have remembered. It is natural to think that Herodotus has drawn on Hecataeus, whom he presents attempting to dissuade the leaders of the Ionian Revolt καταλέγων τὰ τε ἑθνεα πάντα τῶν ἄρχε Δαρείος καὶ τὴν δύναμιν αὐτοῦ (5.36.2) and who had some interest in details of dress (cf. FGrH 1 F 284). David Lewis14 drew attention to the implications of Herodotus' reference forward at 77.1, Καβάλεας . . . τὴν αὐτὴν Κιλικίαν έι ἕχον σκεπήν, τὴν ἑγώ, ἐπεάν κατὰ τὴν Κιλικίων τάξειν διέξειν γένομαι, τότε σημανέω. This suggests that Herodotus is drawing on a written source which described the Cilicians before the Kabalees and adapting it to the needs of his own list which requires the reverse order. A similar conclusion is suggested by his use of the past tense in explaining why the 10,000 elite troops are called Immortals (ἐκαλέοντο, ἑγινοντο 83).15 Mythological and historical notes too (as at 61.3; 62.1; 73; 74.1; 75.2) most likely derive from Hecataeus. (It seems to me impossible to make out a case for any other early prose writer as a major source of information on Persian matters for Herodotus.)

But the consistent emphasis on visual detail makes it tempting to suppose that Herodotus drew quite extensively on the picture which the Samian engineer Mandrokles dedicated at the Heraeum (4.88), portraying Darius reviewing the Empire's forces (ἡγε δὲ πάντα τῶν ἄρχε 4.87.1) at the crossing of the Bosporus. Herodotus' perplexity in describing a peculiar type of Assyrian helmet (63 κράνεα . . . πεπλεγμένα τρόπον τινὰ βαρβαρον ὡς εὐαπήγητον) here is significant. Of course Darius was no more likely than Xerxes to have summoned contingents from the most distant corners of his empire to join

---

13 'The chariots here are introduced, perhaps, to please the poets! Cp. Aesch. Pers. 84 and c.140 infra.' (Macan).
in his European campaign, but artistic licence would have made it appropriate to celebrate the Empire's ethnic and cultural diversity without restriction to what might be observable on any single occasion (as in modern pictures celebrating the scouting movement or the success of Christian missionary activity or the brotherhood of Soviet peoples from Vilnius to Vladivostok). Herodotus knew Samos well (cf. 3.39-60; 120-8; 139-49) and celebrates its great temple (3.60. 4 νημος μέγαστος πάντων νημον των ἰμενίς [ deben]; even if the information about his time there given in the Suda life were merely an inference from his text, it would be excessively sceptical to question his first-hand knowledge.

Did a documentary source supply the hard core of the Army List? Ex Oriente lux, perhaps – or perhaps not. Since Macan's time our knowledge of the Persian Empire has in various ways significantly advanced. In particular, the Treasury and Fortification tablets from Persepolis have revealed a bureaucracy meticulous in its record-keeping (though how easy it was to find one's way around those records is another question: problems of information retrieval are not new, and Ezra 5.17 - 6.2 gives food for thought). Just as the decipherment of Linear B revealed that the reality of the Mycenaean palace civilization was rather different from the impression we get from Homer, so the Persepolis ration-tablets showed that the fairly idealised picture of a feudal aristocracy derived from Herodotus and Xenophon needed modification. Such documents are, of course, a long way from Herodotus' immediate sources, but they raise interesting questions about record-keeping and the availability of information. David Lewis 16 drew attention to Aristoboulus' report of a document found in the Persian camp after the battle of Arbela detailing Darius' arrangement of his forces (Arrian, Anab. 3.11.3). But the orders for the day are a rather different matter from a catalogue of forces. Lewis noted the occurrence in the Persepolis tablets of some of the names of commanders; this certainly confirms their importance, but not their specific military function. How far may the Homeric Catalogue of ships be relevant to consideration of this section? We should not ignore Heleen Sancisi-Weerdenburg's warning (AH 2. 131): 'The frequently repeated statement as to the bias of the Greek sources should not . . . be followed by an attempt to check the Greek information against Iranian evidence that is so often deficient, but by an analysis of the literary and intellectual mould into which these data were inserted. This seems the only way to dehellenise and decolonialise Persian history.'

The naval list (89-99) inspires more confidence; a significant part of this force was drawn from Greek cities, and almost all from regions with which Greeks were familiar. Here it is reasonable to suppose that Herodotus drew extensively on oral information; no doubt he had been exposed from boyhood to the reminiscences of Artemisia's seamen, and more could have been learnt in Samos. But what we have here is not unadulterated oral history: the total (89.1), 1207, all too clearly derives from Aeschylus' figure for Salamis (Pers. 341-3 ξέρξη δε, και γαρ οδά, χιλιας μεν ἦν/ ἔν ἄγε πλήθος, αί δ' υπερκοσκήτω τάξει ἐκατον δίς ἦναν ἐπτά θε' ὅδ' ἐχει λόγος), where the 207 high-speed vessels should be included in the round 1000. The apparent precision is meretricious; in

any case the figure for Doriscus ought to be considerably greater than for Salamis, since Herodotus reports heavy Persian losses in the three days' storm (7.190).

Satisfactory answers to the problems regarding the sources of these lists seem to me as elusive as they were 100 years ago, even though we now know that some Greeks were employed in the Persian administration at a level where they could have gained access to much general Persian information and that there was much more contact between Greeks and Persians than used to be assumed. But despite this advance in our understanding of Greek/Persian relationships Herodotus' chances of accessing a reliable current army list (let alone one relevant to a campaign many years past) do not look good. Even allowing him sympathetic friends in the Persian administration, he could not have located or made sense of such a document without considerable help, and modern experience suggests that bureaucracy does not encourage the unnecessary disclosure of records. The descendants of Demaratus in the Troad (cf. Xen. Hell. 3.1.6; Anab. 2.1.3; 7.8.17) might well have been among Herodotus' informants – but they would hardly have kept an army list among their household treasures. So while there may not be much deliberate invention in these catalogues (as opposed to intelligent guesswork and constructive inference) we should be cautious in using information thus offered when it is not confirmed by other evidence. But those who are better informed about the organization of the Persian army may see their way to a more positive view.

Somewhat similar problems arise with Herodotus' list of the 20 satrapies, multi-ethnic fiscal conglomerates, which he believed Darius organized immediately after his accession (3.89-96). Questions of sources and credibility are well summarised in the introductory note in Asheri's commentary. This cannot straightforwardly reproduce a Persian list: it starts with Ionia (90), and the order of the first six satrapies reflects the standpoint of the Greeks of Asia Minor (90 - 91.3). To some the precision of the numerical information implies reliability (so Briant, From Cyrus to Alexander 392); others may see here a familiar manifestation of narrative art. Thus Asheri on the figures of 600 talents (in silver) for the 14th district (93.2): 'The figure seems excessive for such a poor region'; on the Indian tribute of 360 talents of gold dust (94.2): 'The sum is symbolically excessive and imaginary'. On the totals (95) he concludes his painstaking discussion thus: 'The credibility of these sums has repeatedly been doubted, whether because of the mistakes in calculation, or the frequency of 'mystical' numbers or the improbability of some of the figures. Radically sceptical is the hypothesis that the original source described a fixed tribute of 360 Babylonian talents for each of the twenty satrapies ... According to others, Herodotus' starting point would have been the total sum, which he then divided more or less arbitrarily between the twenty satrapies'. In the fussy detail of what we might call the rates of exchange (89.2) we might see conscientiousness; but the effect is also to discourage the attempt to check the total.

While Herodotus should have had no difficulty in discovering the assessment for Ionia (cf. 6.42.2 on the settlement of Ionia by Artaphernes), the cumulative effect of the

---

17 See further Lewis, 'Persians in Herodotus'; M.C. Miller, Athens and Persia in the Fifth Century BC: a study in cultural receptivity (Cambridge, 1997), 1-133.
various problems presented by this undeniably Hellenocentric list make it hard to believe that its source is an official document. Again, caution in using this information - both on figures and on the composition of the satrapies – is appropriate. 18 There is nothing new in such a conclusion.

By way of a change from cautious agnosticism we may turn to a text which gives rather more support to confidence in Herodotus. The decipherment of the Bisitun inscription brought welcome confirmation of the names of 5 of the 6 nobles who joined Darius in bringing an end to the rule of the usurper (70),19 Intaphernes, Otanes, Gobryas, Hydarnes, and Megabyxus. For the sixth, Ardumanis, Herodotus substitutes Aspathines, reflecting his importance later in the reign; he is named as quiver-bearer on Darius’ tomb and appears on the Persepolis tablets in 494 and 483 as Parnaka's successor in charge of Persepolis. It is cheering to note that Herodotus does significantly better than Ctesias. Darius tells us that he sent this text 'in all directions among the lands' (§70); the fragments of an Aramaic version from Elephantine encourage the hope that there was a Greek translation. It is, however, another question whether Herodotus might have made use of such a document; in general he refers to inscriptions as curiosities, almost as touristic Sehenswürdigkeiten, rather than as historical sources,20 and his account certainly offers significant divergences from the official version.

The sensational events surrounding Darius' accession (or rather his version of them) make a good story, and popular narrative is likely to have transmitted these details. A skilful and sophisticated tradition of Persian storytelling flourished until the advent of radio and TV, transmitting the myths and legends of the Persian-speaking area. Such professional performances in recent times generally lasted about 90 minutes. Behind Firdausi's Shahnameh stretched a long tradition of oral narrative, in which the deeds of kings were a theme of central importance. 21 While the Persian logioi whom Herodotus cites at the start of his work are simply a narrative invention (1.1.1), we may safely assume that their counterparts existed, and must often have provided evening entertainment in caravanserais. That their stories travelled and percolated to Greeks should not surprise us. Victorian travellers in the Middle East emphasise the advantages of employing a dragoman with a good repertoire of stories, and it is clear from the

---

18 How reliable are the extras? 360 white horses from Cilicia (90.3) add a graphic detail in which we would certainly like to believe; but a grim shadow is cast on the staffing of the secretariat by the 500 castrated boys from Babylonia (92) (implying, in view of the riskiness of the operation, a much larger number forced to undergo the procedure).
19 Even if Darius' predecessor was really Cambyses' brother (which I do not believe) he had no right to the throne while Cambyses was alive.
20 See further West 1985 (n. 10).
Persepolis tablets that Greek merchants and embassies would not have journeyed unescorted.22

We get a more familiar type of story with the episode of Intaphernes' downfall (3.118-9). According to Herodotus Intaphernes' precipitate reaction to what he supposed to be unjustified interference with his hard-won privilege of direct access to the king unless the latter was in bed with a woman (cf. 84.2) and his appalling treatment of the officials charged with maintaining the proper formalities led Darius to suspect that his former supporters were conspiring to overthrow him in turn. Having satisfied himself that none of the others was in fact involved, he sentenced to death Intaphernes and his male kin. The story so far presents the Persian élite, and particularly Darius, in a very unfavourable light. The king is occupied in the harem at an hour when he might reasonably be expected to be available for business. Intaphernes inflicts savage and humiliating punishment on men conscientiously doing their duty.

For Herodotus the main interest of the episode lies in the initiative taken by Intaphernes' wife (whose name is never given). Her constant lamentation moves the king to pity, and he offers a reprieve for any one of her condemned (male) kin. She surprises Darius by choosing not her husband or a son but her brother. She explains her reasoning: husband and children are replaceable, but since her parents are dead, she cannot have another brother. Darius is pleased by her reply (apparently her unexpected response satisfies a taste for paradox), and she wins a further concession, the life of her eldest son; but the others (we are not told how many) are all executed.

This chapter has received a concentration of attention because of its obvious relationship to the passage in which Sophocles' Antigone defends her commitment to Polynices with similar reasoning (Ant. 904-20). There seems to be general agreement that Antigone's speech is indebted to Herodotus, not vice versa; there are other indications of Herodotean influence in the Antigone. But we should not focus on these two texts in isolation.23 Over a century ago attention was drawn to Indian and mediaeval Persian

22 It is fair to assume that in the multilingual Achaemenid empire of Herodotus' time there were plenty of people who could make themselves understood, adequately for practical purposes, in one or more languages besides their mother tongue, and could understand a good deal more than they could say. There evidently were official interpreters (cf. 1.86.4; 3.38.4), but we have no idea how they were selected, whether they underwent specialised training or were literate in more than one language. We can only guess how far Herodotus' Persian material has been distorted by linguistic deficiencies. But I suspect that the notorious gold-digging ants (3.102.2; 104.1; 105.1) owe their entomological status to a foreigner's lack of familiarity with an appropriate Greek comparandum. At all events, stories could pass more easily through the language barrier than philosophical or theological concepts. There is no evidence that Herodotus could communicate in any language but Greek; but I would like to think he had some basic Aramaic.

examples of a more coherent version of this tale, in which there are just three men condemned – husband, brother, and son -, and there is no question of really serious crime; the woman's unexpected response wins a reprieve for all three. Although these stories are first attested later than Herodotus, this more economical scenario looks primary; the narrative is much less satisfactory when a larger group is involved. Moreover, it would be quite irrational for Darius to contemplate sparing the man he regards as the ringleader of a conspiracy extensive enough to include his brother-in-law while executing the other suspects, and his decision to exempt Intaphernes' eldest son does more credit to his heart than to his head; it is hard to think of a more powerful motive for regicide than the desire to avenge a father unjustly executed (cf.1.155.1; Cypria F 32 Bernabé, 25 Davies, 31 West, νήπιος ὃς πατέρα κτείνας ύιοὺς καταλείπει).

How much historical substance is there here? The story has proved very attractive to historians. It has been thought to offer evidence for an otherwise unattested act of revolt (or suspected revolt) and the summary procedure deemed appropriate for dealing with it, for a change in the character of Darius' regime and the curtailment of privileges initially granted to the nobility, and for the scope for independent action and access to the king allowed to Persian noblewomen (though the detail of the woman's persistence in lamentation at the palace gates (119.3 φοιτώσα ἐπὶ τᾶς θύρας τοῦ βασιλέως κλαίεσκεν ἃν καὶ ὀδυρέσκετο), her protestations nicely paralleling Chorasmian demands for water in the previous episode (117. 5 στάτες κατὰ τᾶς θύρας τοῦ βασιλέως), presupposes a more modest palace than the vast complexes of Sousa and Persepolis, reminding us rather of the parable of the importunate widow and the unjust judge in Luke 18. 1-5). But the tale clearly embodies a migratory motif, suitable for adaptation to various autocrats (like the motif of Ivan the Terrible's generous response to a peasant couple's gift of a large turnip or Marie Antoinette's 'Let them eat cake') ; it should not be treated as a precious nugget of Persian history.

This is an anecdote, not an ambitious narrative like the accounts of Cyrus' childhood and rise to power and of the events leading up to Darius' accession. Herodotus' innumerabiles fabulae (Cic. Leg.1.5) effectively distract us from the gaps in his record. But he was clearly short of information about the more significant achievements of the Persian kings (as indeed about Persian customs and the Persian heartland). Thus his account of Cambyses' reign begins only after the conquest of Egypt, in itself a remarkable military achievement. Similarly, Darius' extension of the empire to northern India is simply treated as a fait accompli; we first see Indians participating in Darius' colloquium on funerary ritual (3.38.4), where their presence seems to imply that they are already Darius' subjects, and the next we hear of India is as the final item in the list of satrapies (3.94.2).

Herodotus' opening sentence declares his purpose to be the preservation of the κλέος of great achievement. Compare Pindar (Pyth.1.92-4) ὄπωθόμβροτον ἄφαμα δόξας / ὅλον ἀποιχομένων ἀνδρῶν διαίταν μανύη / καὶ λογίοις καὶ ἄοιδοις. λόγιος is difficult to translate, 24 but the pairing with ἄοιδοι is important; λόγιοι are not merely learned but

skilled in performance, storytellers with an art rather different from the singer’s. Their expertise does not consist in disinterested enquiry but in the celebration of what deserves to be remembered. It is, of course, essential for such a purpose that the story told should be believed to be true. Such is the tradition to which Herodotus belonged (Γραφικὸς ἀνήρ, καὶ ἠδύς ὁ λόγος, καὶ χάρις ἐπεστὶ καὶ δεινότης καὶ ὁ φα σὲ δηγήμασι· μίθου δ’ ὡς ὅτ’ ἀοιδός, ἐπισταμένως’ μὲν οὖ, λυγυρὸς δὲ καὶ γλαφυρῶς ἡγοῦεν (Plut. de mal. 43)). The evolution of literary prose writing allowed such commemoration on an unprecedentedly ambitious scale.

Herodotus’ work conveys a very strong impression of inexhaustible curiosity combined with generous human sympathies; he wins over the reader very quickly, and the charm of his presentation makes us reluctant to doubt his word. But the attempt to impose on him the aims and standards of an investigator committed to objective research calls for a degree of special pleading that in the end does no credit to his intelligence while obscuring the subtlety and sophistication of his literary art.

There are no simple answers to enquiries about Herodotus’ sources of information, though I suspect that if we knew more about them, we might often be surprised (as we are with his use of Bacchylides). I will end, as I began, by quoting Macan: ‘The historical value of the matter found in Herodotus’ work varies not merely from volume to volume, or from Book to Book, but from paragraph to paragraph, from sentence to sentence, from line to line. . . . There is no page on which fact and fiction – if so crude a distinction may be admitted for the sake of argument – are not to be found lying side by side, or indissolubly interpenetrated, mutually affected, not as oil and vinegar, but as water and wine’. 25

Stephanie West