



## The Father of History

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‘Herodotus’, Tom Holland writes, ‘is the most entertaining of historians. Indeed, he is as entertaining as anyone who has ever written—historian or not.’

A bold claim though this may be, it cannot be denied that Herodotus’ work has influenced myriad writers that have come since. His legacy has been both profound and long-lived, and continues to be felt today.

As with many Classical authors, very little is known of Herodotus’ life. We know that Herodotus was born in the Carian city of Halicarnassus in south-western Anatolia (now Bodrum, Turkey) at some point in the early fifth century BC, and we definitely know that he wrote a ??????? (*historia*, or ‘enquiry’) in nine books. Everything else is highly speculative.

Nevertheless, his great legacy—the carefully-compiled *historia*—gained a life of its own, and ultimately gave its name to a literary genre and academic discipline. In the fifth century BC, he produced what was essentially the first prose nonfiction work in Greek—apparently the product of

tireless research and the cataloguing of many different accounts. Its stated purpose was to ensure ‘that human achievement may be spared the ravages of time, and that everything great and astounding ... be kept alive.’

In his treatise *De Legibus* in the first century BC, the Roman orator and statesman Cicero referred to Herodotus in passing as *pater historiae* (‘the father of history’). Herodotus has likewise been dubbed ‘the father of history’ by hosts of academics since.

If he was the ‘father of history’, however, Herodotus was not the father of the political, scientific form of history; that title more properly belongs to Thucydides, the Athenian historian who flourished in the generation after Herodotus. Thucydides’ history had a specific, clear focus: his purpose was to recount the Peloponnesian War—the brutal conflict between Athens and Sparta towards the end of the fifth century BC—and to report only facts that related directly to his main topic. Naturally, as an Athenian he was selective of the facts which were included.

Herodotus’ work stands in bewildering contrast to that of Thucydides. True: the main topic of Herodotus’ writing is essentially political, as it concerns the origins of the war between the Greeks and the Persians and the defeat of the Persian invasion of Greece in the early fifth century BC.

But his account entails a great deal more. He begins with the story of Gyges, who was compelled to kill the king of the Lydians after being forced to see the queen naked. This then leads to the story of Gyges’ great-great-grandson Croesus, who foolishly declared war on the Persians and destroyed his kingdom in doing so.

Elsewhere, Herodotus’ narrative digresses to discuss the explorations of the Phoenicians, the customs of the Egyptians, the source of the Nile, the geography of Scythia, and various dynastic struggles in Persia. In fact, it is only half-way through his work—in book five—that Herodotus finally approaches the outbreak of the Persian wars with the Greeks, and only in book seven that Xerxes arrives on the Greek mainland.

Given the extremely broad interests of his work, it is perhaps unsurprising that Herodotus laid the foundations for many disciplines in addition to history.

As Holland argues in his new translation of the *historia*, Herodotus produced the earliest example of a work on geography, political discourse, and academic research in general. ‘The process of researching and recording facts on a would-be encyclopaedic scale begins with his history’, so Holland writes. ‘Anyone who has ever used the internet to check up on a fact stands in a line of descent from him.’

Holland is a London-based historian and prolific writer, whose main interests are ancient and early medieval history. In addition to writing four historical novels, radio adaptations of important Classical works, plays and documentaries, he is the author of a series of nonfiction bestsellers which collectively explore some of history’s most dramatic turning-points. First, in 2004, was *Rubicon*, which charts the collapse of the Roman Republic in the first century BC. This was followed in 2006 by *Persian Fire*, on the Persian invasion of mainland Greece in the fifth century

BC.

His 2009 book, *Millennium*, explores the rise of medieval Western Christendom in the two centuries surrounding AD 1000, and his 2012 book, *In the Shadow of the Sword*, concerns the rise of Islam in the sixth and seventh centuries. In his latest book, Holland has tried his hand at something different. He provides a bold new translation of Herodotus.

For the most part, he succeeds, although he hardly provides a literal translation from the Greek language. In the first book, for example, he has the reluctant regicide Gyges say to the Lydian queen,

‘...now that you have twisted my arm, and made me swear to kill my master—something I really do not wish to do, I can assure you—answer me this: how do we actually lay our hands on him?’

While this captures the sense of the original, the idiom ‘twisting the arm’ would have been alien to Herodotus. A more literal translation from the Greek would look something more like this:

‘...since you compel me, not willing, to kill my master, please: I will hear what manner we will lay our hands on him.’

The pages of Holland’s book are littered with other such modern English idioms that certainly were not in Herodotus’ original— including ‘to cut a long story short’, ‘I haven’t the foggiest idea’, ‘nipping Persian greatness in the bud’, and ‘crack open the wine and start partying’. Holland also has a tendency to turn statements into questions, and generally rephrases sections for dramatic effect.

While it isn’t an accurate rendition of the Greek, Holland’s version makes better English than a more literal translation would, and is a compelling read for anyone wanting a highly readable introduction to Herodotus’ work.

Holland’s translation is supplemented with useful notes by the Cambridge Classical historian Paul Cartledge.

In addition to providing much helpful background information on Herodotus’ life and style, Cartledge makes some unusual observations on Herodotus’ legacy in the contemporary era.

Traditionally, Cartledge notes, Thucydides was regarded as the model historian, not Herodotus. Although both were essential school texts at various times, Thucydides was preferred both because of his Attic Greek and because of the extremely focused, political, and secular nature of his account. Herodotus received some criticism because of his tendency to digress on irrelevant matters and the extremely broad interests of his work.

Even in antiquity, writers like Cicero could not help but be irked by Herodotus’ tendency to

incorporate mythology and local legends into his supposedly factual account; indeed, in one very hostile essay from the first or second century AD, the historian Plutarch dubbed Herodotus the 'father of lies'.

In the twenty-first century, this perception of Herodotus has changed. 'The balance has tilted', Cartledge argues, 'quite sharply away from Thucydides and towards Herodotus'. To this, Cartledge offers two explanations. The first, he suggests, is the end of the 'old East- West, Communist v. Free World, Cold War' dichotomy and a decline in interest in political history.

The second explanation that he gives relates to the way the historical discipline has reacted to the challenge of 'postmodernism'— namely, traditional historians have given more weight to the reliability of their sources.

According to Cartledge, this has made Herodotus, who took great care in citing his sources and weighing different accounts, preferable to Thucydides, who purports to state only the facts, and so rarely does either.

It should be seriously debated whether all of these changes to the history discipline have ultimately been good, and whether the wandering Herodotus is always a better model than the firm and focused Thucydides.

Nevertheless, it is indisputable that both produced works that were, in their own unique ways, earth-shattering. Holland's most recent book provides a compelling introduction to one.