STUDIES IN
HISTORIOGRAPHY

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CHAPTER EIGHT

THE PLACE OF HERODOTUS IN THE HISTORY OF HISTORIOGRAPHY*

I have often felt rather sorry for Dionysius of Halicarnassus. How embarrassing it must have been for a budding historian to have the father of history as his own fellow-citizen. No wonder that Dionysius left Halicarnassus and emigrated to Rome where the name of Herodotus, if adroitly used, could even become an asset. In Rome Dionysius was wholeheartedly devoted to the memory of his formidable predecessor. Dionysius is in fact the only ancient writer who never said anything unpleasant about Herodotus. Yet even he never dared to defend Herodotus from the most serious accusation of his enemies, the accusation of being a liar. To us it may perhaps seem odd that the ancients saw nothing incongruous in being at one and the same time the father of history and a liar. But, as far as I know, Francesco Petrarca was the first to notice the implicit contradiction between these two terms and to object to it.

Petrarch had never seen a manuscript of Herodotus, nor would it have made a great difference to him if he had: he never got beyond the most rudimentary knowledge of Greek. But he read most carefully what his Romans told him about the Greeks and was struck by what Cicero said about Herodotus. In the same sentence of De Legibus I, 1, 5, Cicero refers to Herodotus as ‘the father of history’ and brackets him with Theopompus as another notorious liar: ‘quamquam et apud Herodotum patrem historiae et apud Theopompum sunt innumerabiles fabulae.’ This indeed, as Petrarch noticed, was not the only occasion on which Cicero treated Herodotus as a liar, ‘fabulosus’. In a passage of De Divinatione (II, 116) Cicero expressed the suspicion that Herodotus himself had fabricated and attributed to Delphi the ambiguous oracle about the results of the war between Croesus and Cyrus. In the same way, Cicero added, Ennius must have fabricated the story


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of the ambiguous Delphic oracle that encouraged Pyrrhus to march against the Romans. Petrarch was shocked by the suggestion that the father of history could be the author of a forgery. There was no harm in attributing an oracle to the imagination of Ennius. A poet, Petrarch knew, had a right to invent – not so the father of history. *Itaque satis credi potest hoc ab Ennio suo quodam iure fictum esse. De Herodoto autem, quem Cicero ipse patrem historiae vocat, quod superioris oraculi factor existerit, non tam facile crediderim.*

This passage of the *Rerum Memorandarum* (IV, 25–6) is typical of Petrarch’s shrewd, yet naïve, understanding of the classical world. If he had been able to read Greek, he would have seen that Cicero was simply conforming to a traditional opinion about Herodotus. Herodotus was not denied the place of *primum inventor* of history, but at the same time was distrusted to the point of being considered a liar.

Admittedly, the Greeks and Romans were not apt to kneel in silent adoration before their own classical writers. Historians were especially open to accusations of dishonesty. But no other writer was so severely criticized as Herodotus. His bad reputation in the ancient world is something exceptional that requires explanation. It does so the more because the ancient opinion had a considerable influence on Herodotus’ reputation among the students of ancient history from the fifteenth century to our own times. The story of Herodotus’ posthumous struggle against his detractors is an important chapter in the history of historical thought: it is also, in my opinion, an important clue to the understanding of Herodotus himself.

Herodotus combined two types of historical research. He enquired about the Persian war – an event of one generation earlier – and he travelled in the East to collect information about present conditions and past events in those countries. The combination of two such tasks would be difficult for any man at any time. It was particularly difficult for a historian who had to work in Greece during the fifth century BC. When Herodotus worked on Greek history, he had very few written documents to rely upon: Greek history was as yet mainly transmitted by oral tradition. When he travelled to the East, he found any amount of written evidence, but he had not been trained to read it.

Let us say immediately that Herodotus was successful in his enterprise. We have now collected enough evidence to be able to say that he can be trusted. Curiously enough we are in a better position to judge him as a historian of the East than as historian of the Persian Wars. In the last century Orientalists have scrutinized Herodotus...
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with the help of archaeology and with the knowledge of languages that he could not understand. They have ascertained that he described truthfully what he saw and reported honestly what he heard. Where he went wrong, either his informants misled him or he had misunderstood in good faith what he was told. We are not so well placed for the history of the Persian Wars because Herodotus himself remains our main source. Wherever we happen to be able to check him with the help of inscriptions or of simple topography, we have no reason to be dissatisfied with him. This, however, does not mean that we are in a position to say how Herodotus wrote his history. We do not yet know exactly how he proceeded in his enquiry, compared different versions, wrote down his notes, gave them their present literary form. Above all we cannot say how much he owed to earlier writers. But we know enough about Herodotus' alleged predecessors – Cadmus of Miletus, Hecataeus, Dionysius of Miletus, Charon of Lampsaus, Xanthus of Sardes – to state confidently that they did not do the work for him. There was no Herodotus before Herodotus.

The almost total loss of the geographical and ethnographical literature that preceded and accompanied Herodotus' work makes it impossible for us to assess exactly how much he owed to earlier and contemporary writers. But any careful reader of his work will agree that his main research must have been done not on written, but on oral tradition. After all, Herodotus himself tells us that he used ἰδιός, γνώμη and ἱστορία: his eyes, his judgment and his talent for enquiry. This can be confirmed by an analysis of the main episodes of the Persian wars. It is easy to see that what he knows about Thermopylae chiefly comes from Sparta, whereas Athenian traditions are behind his accounts of Marathon, Salamis and Plataea.

In other words Herodotus managed to produce a very respectable history mainly on the basis of sightseeing and oral tradition. He succeeded in putting together a trustworthy account of events he was too young to have witnessed and of countries whose languages he did not understand. We know that his history is respectable because we are now able to check it against independent evidence. But we must admit that if we had to give an a priori estimate of the chances of success in writing history by Herodotus' method, we should probably shake our heads in sheer despondency. Herodotus' success in touring the world and handling oral traditions is something exceptional by any standard – something that we are not yet in a position to explain.
fully. The secrets of his workshop are not yet all out. Therefore we cannot be surprised if the ancients found it difficult to trust an author who had worked on such a basis as Herodotus.

It is only too obvious that Thucydides ultimately determined the verdict of antiquity on his predecessor. He carefully read (or listened to) his Herodotus and decided that the Herodotean approach to history was unsafe. To write serious history, one had to be a contemporary of the events under discussion and one had to be able to understand what people were saying. Serious history – according to Thucydides – was not concerned with the past, but with the present; it could not be concerned with distant countries, but only with those places in which you lived and with those people whose thoughts you could put into your own words without difficulty. Thucydides did not believe that there was a future in Herodotus’ attempt to describe events he had not witnessed and to tell the story of men whose language he could not understand. We now know that Thucydides was insensitive to Herodotus’ bold attempt to open up the gates of the past and of foreign countries to historical research. But we must recognize that he knew what he was doing in criticizing Herodotus. He was setting up stricter standards of historical reliability, even at the risk of confining history to a narrow patch of contemporary events. Thucydides claimed that a historian must personally vouch for what he tells. He allowed only a limited amount of inferences from present facts to events of the past. He also implied that it is easier to understand political actions than any other type of action. With Thucydides history became primarily political history and was confined to contemporary events.

Now Thucydides certainly did not succeed in imposing his strict standard of historical reliability on other historians, but he succeeded in discouraging the idea that one could do real research about the past. Greek and Roman historians in fact, after Herodotus, did very little research into the past and relatively seldom undertook to collect first-hand evidence about foreign countries. They concentrated on contemporary history or summarized and interpreted the work of former historians. Search for unknown facts about the past was left to antiquarians, and the work of the antiquarians hardly influenced the historians. It can be doubted whether Polybius studied Aristotle’s constitutions or whether Livy ever read his Varro thoroughly. Indeed, the very existence of the antiquarians was conditioned by the fact that historians interested themselves only in a small sector of what nowadays we should consider original historians only in so far as they recognized which previous historians had collected. Tacitus’ Annals are the most conspicuous case of a history written with a minimum amount of research. And Tacitus himself is an example of a historian who relies on interpretation rather than on original research.

Ancient historiography never overcame by what we can call the paramouncy of close to the past, the less likely his memory anything new to the knowledge of it. Ephorus, Livy and Tacitus all, they were by no means deprived of memory for they knew that it was no use trying to tell the story of the Dorian invasion. Livy was accurately aware of the traditions he was bound to the history of Rome. But neither of them knew as little as some literary sources for an independent enquiry.

Thus Thucydides imposed the idea that the ancient historians were the only serious historians, and he even wrote in the stream of ancient historiography. He was a political historian. His tales, however, were not always professional. Even those who liked him could hardly defend him as a reliable historian. Moreover, questions like if he had never seen and about people whose lands and whose countries he had only visited were not always asked. Either he had concealed his sources, and invented his facts and was a liar. The different criticism of Thucydides. There was not an author who could write about the whole life of Heraclitus, as we know, from whom he could some could be found. A few were authenticated, like Hecataeus, the mythographer Acusilaus, the
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small sector of what nowadays we should call history. Every generalization of this kind is bound to do violence to a certain number of facts. But on the whole it is apparent that the great historians of antiquity left their mark either on first-hand accounts of contemporary events or on the reinterpretation of facts already collected by previous historians. Xenophon, Theopompus, Hieronymus of Cardia, Polybius, Sallust were pre-eminently historians of their own time. Ephorus, Livy and Tacitus are at different levels to be considered original historians only in so far as they reinterpreted facts which previous historians had collected. The surviving books of Tacitus' *Annals* are the most conspicuous example of a great work of history written with a minimum amount of independent research. And Tacitus himself is an example of what can happen to a historian who relies on interpretation rather than on research: if he is not wrong in his facts, he is liable to be arbitrary in his explanations.\(^1\)

Ancient historiography never overcame the limitations imposed by what we can call the paramouncy of contemporary history. The more remote the past, the less likely historians were to contribute anything new to the knowledge of it. Ephorus and Livy were honest men. They were by no means deprived of critical sense. Ephorus decided that it was no use trying to tell the story of the Greeks before the Dorian invasion. Livy was acutely aware of the legendary character of the traditions he was bound to follow about the early history of Rome. But neither of them knew how to go beyond the literary sources for an independent enquiry about the past.

Thus Thucydides imposed the idea that contemporary political history was the only serious history; and Herodotus was cut off from the stream of ancient historiography. He was neither a contemporary nor a political historian. His tales, however attractive, looked oddly unprofessional. Even those who liked him as a patriotic and pleasant writer could hardly defend him as a reliable historian. Herodotus invited awkward questions: how could he tell so much about events he had never seen and about people whose language he did not know and whose countries he had only visited for a short time, if at all? Either he had concealed his sources, and was a plagiarist, or he had invented his facts and was a liar. The dilemma dominated ancient criticism of Herodotus. There was not a very great choice of predecessors, as we know, from whom he could have stolen his facts, but some could be found. A few were authentic enough: the geographer Hecataeus, the mythographer Acusilaus, the genealogist Pherekydes
of Athens, perhaps also Xanthus the historian of Lydia, and Dionysiou of Miletus the historian of Persia. Others were late forgers, but were accepted as authentic archaic writers by the majority of ancient critics: for instance the alleged first historian Cadmus of Miletus. Furthermore there were genuine historians whom Hellenistic scholarship placed before Herodotus, whereas some at least of the most authoritative modern scholars incline to take them for his younger contemporaries. To mention only the best instance, F. Jacoby has given very cogent reasons for dating Charon of Lampasus not in the middle but at the end of the fifth century. All these historians counted in the eyes of ancient scholars as potential sources of Herodotus and were made to contribute to the case for Herodotus' plagiarism. But even with the help of writers who were later than Herodotus and therefore may have used him, rather than having been used by him, the case for plagiarism can never have been a very impressive one. Many of Herodotus' enemies seem to have preferred the alternative line of attack which was to present him as a liar. It was obviously easier to dismiss his evidence than to trace his sources. After all, he could not have been considered the father of history if it had been so evident that he had copied from his predecessors. Though we shall see that there were books on Herodotus as a plagiarist, the final impression left by the ancient criticisms of Herodotus is that he was a story-teller— a liar. Here again we can measure the impact of Thucydides' verdict on his predecessor.

Herodotus had hardly ceased writing his history when Thucydides began to reflect on the mistakes and shortcomings of his predecessor. A few decades after Thucydides, Ctesias launched another attack against Herodotus by questioning his competence both as a student of Greek history and as an historian of the East. Ctesias had all the external qualifications for checking Herodotus' results. He had lived several years at the Persian court and must have understood Persian. He had opportunities of access to Persian records certainly denied to Herodotus. The impact of Ctesias' attack was somewhat reduced by its very violence and extravagance. A historian who puts the battle of Plataea before Salamis in order to impress on his readers his independence from the despised predecessor is likely to get himself into trouble. People were not slow to realize that Ctesias was no less open to suspicion than Herodotus. But, as we know, conflicting suspicions do not cancel each other out. Herodotus' reputation remained tarnished. Paradoxically, he was often associated with

Ctesias as an unreliable historian. Even Ariobarzanes, a contemporary of Herodotus, denounced Herodotus' mistakes on historical matters; and he formulated his criticism in the form of a 'story-teller'.

The expedition of Alexander the Great certainly revealed lacunae in Herodotus' History. Alexander's Geography repeatedly echoes and makes use of the works of Herodotus. Local historians and antiquarians were not satisfied with the glory of the Hellenistic era. Plutarch's De Herodoti Malignitate can be read as a response to Herodotus' History. It is a pity that Plutarch's polemic, a series of criticisms against Herodotus, does not fit into the pattern. It is a pity that Plutarch's polemic is not directed at Herodotus himself, as in the case of Herodotus' History. Plutarch does not seem to have said the words 'lies' or 'false' from the time of his death. Titles such as On Herodotus' Lies by Aelius Aristides, or On Herodotus' Lies by Libanius do not appear in the works of either of these authors. There was no dishonesty of which he was
Ctesias as an unreliable historian. Even Aristotle went out of his way to denounce Herodotus’ mistakes over small details of natural history; and he formulated his criticism in such terms as to involve the reliability of the whole of Herodotus’ history. He calls Herodotus a ‘story-teller’.

The expedition of Alexander the Great, by opening up the East, certainly revealed lacunae in Herodotus’ information. Strabo in his Geography repeatedly echoes and makes his own the criticisms of Alexandrian scholarship. Meanwhile, the Orientals themselves were being Hellenized. They learnt to read what the Greeks had written about them in former centuries and, not unnaturally, found it unsatisfactory. Manetho, the Egyptian priest who tried to present the history of his people to the Greeks, also wrote a pamphlet against Herodotus. The Greeks themselves became increasingly impatient with Herodotus for patriotic reasons. What may seem to us the wonderful serenity and sense of humour of Herodotus in judging the issues between Greeks and Barbarians was for them evidence that the historian had been ‘a friend of the barbarians’. Even the local patriotism of Hellenistic Greeks operated against his reputation. Local historians and antiquarians were glad to show him up: he had not said enough about the glories of their own cities. All the anti-Herodotean literature of the Hellenistic age is unfortunately lost, but Plutarch’s De Herodoti Malignitate can give us some idea of the complaints that were lodged against the father of history. Plutarch puts together a series of criticisms against Herodotus: excessive sympathy for the barbarians, partiality for Athens, gross unfairness towards the other Greek cities, lack of truthfulness where facts are concerned and lack of balance where judgments are involved. History was a form of encomium to Plutarch, and evidently Herodotus did not fit into the pattern. It is a pity that nobody has yet produced a competent commentary on Plutarch’s pamphlet against Herodotus, both because it is typical of the way in which late Greeks looked at their past and because it influenced the judgment about Herodotus of many classical scholars from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century. Plutarch does not seem to have said the worst about Herodotus. To guess from the titles of lost works, even worse was in store for the father of history. Titles such as On Herodotus’ thefts by Valerius Pollio or On Herodotus’ lies by Aelius Harpocrates – not to speak of the book by Libanius Against Herodotus – seem to imply that there was no dishonesty of which he was not capable.

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With all that, Herodotus remained a classic. The immaculate grace of his style defied criticism. His information about Oriental countries was more easily criticized than replaced. Notwithstanding Manetho and Berossus, he remained the standard authority on Egypt and Babylonia. His epic tale of the Persian wars was a unique document of the Greek past. The accusation of lack of patriotism could hardly pass unchallenged. We can easily draw up a list of admirers of Herodotus. Theopompos summarized him in two books, No less a critic than Aristarchus wrote a commentary on him. The discovery of a fragment of this commentary has been enough to dispose of the legend that Herodotus was almost forgotten in the Hellenistic age. From the first century BC to the late second century AD Herodotus was in special favour as a model of style. Archaism operated in his favour. Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Arrian and Lucian were his champions. Dionysius says, 'If we take up his book, we are filled with admiration till the last syllable and always seek for more.' What more splendid compliment could Herodotus desire? Lucian is no less enthusiastic: 'If only we could imitate Herodotus – not all his good qualities because this is beyond hope – but at least one of them.'

Yet there are very disturbing features in these apologies for Herodotus. Dionysius does not argue that Herodotus is a reliable historian: he compares him with Thucydides and gives reasons for the superiority of Herodotus that can persuade only those who do not care for reliability in a history. According to Dionysius, Herodotus chose a better subject than Thucydides, because he told the glories and not the misfortunes of the Greeks. He gave his history a better beginning and a better end. He wrote up his subject in a more interesting way and he arranged his materials better. In points of style he can at least compete with Thucydides. If Thucydides is more concise, Herodotus is more vivid; if Thucydides is more robust, Herodotus is more graceful. Herodotus' beauty is 'radiant', where Thucydides' is awe-inspiring. All is in favour of Herodotus – except truth.

In the same way Lucian admires him without ever implying that he is a reliable historian. Indeed Lucian positively denies that Herodotus is trustworthy. At least twice he couples him with Ctesias as one of the historians who are notorious liars. In the pamphlet of 'How to write history' (Quomodo sit historia conscribere) Lucian definitely presents Thucydides as the model of the fearless, incorruptible, free, sincere and truthful historian. He emphasizes the fact that Thucydides developed his rules for the first time. Lucian explicitly denies his truthfulness.

It is my submission that all this resulted from the fact that Herodotus had dared to write a kind of history that was approved and which later historians found valuable. The legend of Herodotus the liar is the most frequent of the achievements of Herodotus the historian. It is observed that if Thucydides disapproved of his style, he did not challenge Herodotus' assumptions. He was written from oral tradition. In the circumstances, it was hardly possible to think otherwise. There were not enough written documents to make a basis for history. Thucydides was far from the possibilities offered by the exploitation of written records. But it could never occur to him that the primary source for history: if he had thought about it, he would have written the history of the Peloponnesian War. But the fact that later historians never tried to write a history that had originally been dictated by the conquerors of Greece. In Hellenistic Egypt there would have been a wealth of written records to exploit; and a new literary movement certainly not scarce in Rome during the late Republic. But the study of written records remained the occupation for the Greek and Roman historian. He could not dictate the paramounity of contemporaneous evidence. Though credited, he remained the father of history. The pre-eminence of personal observation until historians decided to go to the record for the record, as we all know, is a recent phenomenon. Greek antiquarians knew something about this. They knew that the antiquarians of the Renaissance preferred them to written accounts. But this method became really effective only a hundred years ago. The antiquarians of the Renaissance preferred the past. But this method became really effective only a hundred years ago.
that Thucydides developed his rules for the historian after having observed what Herodotus had done (41–2). Those who speak about Dionysius and Lucian as the great champions of Herodotus in antiquity too often forget to add that Dionysius implicitly and Lucian explicitly deny his truthfulness.

It is my submission that all this resulted from the fact that Herodotus had dared to write a kind of history of which Thucydides disapproved and which later historians found remote and uncongenial. The legend of Herodotus the liar is the result of the authentic achievements of Herodotus the historian. But it will have been observed that if Thucydides disapproved of writing on the past, he did not challenge Herodotus’ assumption that history can be written from oral tradition. In the circumstances of the fifth century it was hardly possible to think otherwise. At least in Greece there were not enough written documents to make a sufficiently broad basis for history. Thucydides was far from being blind to the possibilities offered by the exploitation of written documents. Indeed he was one of the very few ancient historians to use written diplomatic records. But it could never occur to him that written records were the primary source for history: if he had thought so, he would never have written the history of the Peloponnesian War. More remarkable is the fact that later historians never tried to modify an approach that had originally been dictated by the conditions of fifth-century Greece. In Hellenistic Egypt there would have been an embarrassing wealth of written records to exploit; and written records were certainly not scarce in Rome during the late Republic and the Empire. But the study of written records remained to the end an exceptional occupation for the Greek and Roman historians. If Thucydides dictated the paramountcy of contemporary history, Herodotus determined the paramountcy of oral evidence. This explains why, though discredited, he remained the father of history.

The pre-eminence of personal observation and oral evidence lasted until historians decided to go to the record office. Familiarity with the record office, as we all know, is a recently acquired habit for the historian, hardly older than a century. It is true that the Roman and Greek antiquarians knew something about the use of documents and that the antiquarians of the Renaissance perfected this approach to the past. But this method became really effective and universally accepted only a hundred years ago. The antiquarians began to study
systematically the records of the past in the fifteenth century, but
only in the eighteenth century did the barriers between antiquarianism
and history break down, and only in the nineteenth did it become
established practice for the historian to look for new evidence before
writing new books of history. The historians continued to compile
ancient literary sources and medieval chronicles long after Spanheim,
Maffei and Mabillon had worked out the proper method of studying
coins, inscriptions and medieval charters. Gibbon was perhaps the
first historian concerned with the classical world to pay attention to
the results of antiquarian studies: he used the results of antiquarian
labour. But even Gibbon made very little independent research in the
fields of numismatics, epigraphy and archaeology. The documentary
or antiquarian approach to the past is now so integral a part of
historical studies that we sometimes forget that Mommsen was the
first Roman historian systematically to use inscriptions and coins.
Not until Rostovtzeff did archaeology come into its own for the
history of the Roman empire. I am old enough to have witnessed
the surprise caused by Rostovtzeff’s mastery of archaeological data
for historical purposes.

The antiquarian or documentary approach to history has been the
most effective way of dealing with Thucydides’ objection against a
history of the past. We may indulge in the illusion that if Thucydides
were to come back to life he would not reject our methods with the
contempt with which he rejected the method of Herodotus. The
labours of the antiquarians between the fifteenth and the nineteenth
centuries prepared the way for an approach to the past that effect-
ively undermined the paramouny of contemporary history. By
excavating sites, searching the files of the record office, comparing
coins, reading inscriptions and papyri, we have gone into the past
with the same confidence with which Thucydides and his informants
went about the assembly places of contemporary Sparta and Athens.
We can collect reliable facts without being eye-witnesses in the
Thucydidean sense. In unguarded moments of pride we may even be
tempted to tell Thucydides that we know more about Athenian
tribute lists than he ever did.

It would however be a great mistake of historical perspective to
believe that the documentary approach to history has been the only
way in which modern historiography has overcome the limitations
imposed by Thucydides on ancient historiography. Before the study
of documentary and archaeological evidence became a generalized

practice, there was a revival of the Herodotean method of
the past by way of enquiries founded on travel and the discovery of
foreign countries. Defeated in antiquity, Herodotus had rediscovered in
the sixteenth century. The revival of the Herodotean method, which happened then, is the first
historiography to an independent study of the past.

In the sixteenth century historians travelled abroad, questioned local people, went back to
the past by collecting oral traditions. In some cases, in others they were missionaries
seldom professional historians. But they had the extraordinary reputation of Herodotus’
method. The new diplomacy required collecting
traditions of foreign countries; religious
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sixteenth century. The revival of the Herodotean approach to the
past, which happened then, is the first contribution of modern
historiography to an independent study of the past.

In the sixteenth century historians travelled once more in foreign
countries, questioned local people, went back from the present to the
past by collecting oral traditions. In some cases they acted as ambas-
sadors, in others they were missionaries and explorers: they were
seldom professional historians. But they wrote history—a history
extraordinarily reminiscent of Herodotus both in style and in
method. The new diplomacy required careful examination of the
traditions of foreign countries; religious propaganda made urgent
the production of objective accounts of the peoples to be converted.
Above all, there was the discovery of America with all that it implied.
There is no need to assume that the Italian diplomats and Spanish
missionaries who worked on their ‘relazioni’ or ‘relaciones’ were
under the influence of Herodotus. Some of these writers—like
Pietro Martire and Francisco López de Gómara—had had a good
classical education; others, like Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, had
the reputation of hardly knowing what Latin was. As the historical
approach is approximately the same in all of them, it is evident that
classical models counted far less than direct experience and con-
temporary needs. The influence of Herodotus and other classical
scholars may colour some details, but the ‘relazioni’ as a whole are
certainly independent of classical models. What matters to us is that
they vindicated Herodotus, because they showed that one could
trade abroad, tell strange stories, enquire into past events, without
necessarily being a liar. One of the standard objections against
Herodotus had been that his tales were incredible. But now the study
of foreign countries and the discovery of America revealed customs
even more extraordinary than those described by Herodotus.

Classical scholars soon became aware of the implications of these
discoveries. They were delighted to find the New World a witness in
favour of the classical authors. As I recently wrote in another con-
text, one of the consequences of the discovery of the New World was
to confirm classical scholars in their belief that the perfect ancient
world had been perfectly described by perfect ancient authors. If
Herodotus did not inspire the students of America, students of
America and other foreign countries inspired the defenders of Herodotus. He regained his reputation during the sixteenth century.

My theory that Herodotus recovered from Thucydides' attack only after two thousand years in the sixteenth century can be proved both positively and negatively. I shall show that in the fifteenth century the old suspicions about him revived, but that in the sixteenth century his reputation improved considerably as a result of the new interest in ethnography.

I must admit that in order to dramatize the role of America I have so far underrated the part of Turkey in this development. The emergence of the Turks is another factor that must be taken into account in the story of the fortunes and misfortunes of Herodotus. What happened to Herodotus in Byzantine civilization is beyond my competence. But in the last century of the Byzantine empire the story of the old struggle between the Greeks and the Persians acquired a new poignancy. The Turks had replaced the Persians. Herodotus contained a tale of glory that could be a consolation in the present mortal predicament; but he seems to have been appreciated especially because in his quiet way he had understood the Persians, and through him the Turks could be seen more objectively. An understanding of the approaching rulers was perhaps more needed in that situation than celebration of past victories. The last great historian of Byzantium, Laonicus Chalcocondyles, was a student and imitator of Herodotus. It is impressive to see how he described the contemporary world from London to Baghdad in Herodotean terms. He was either the brother or the cousin of one of the Byzantine masters of the Italian humanists, Demetrius Chalcocondyles, and there can be no doubt that he was one of those who directly or indirectly transmitted interest and admiration for Herodotus to the Italian scholars of the first half of the fifteenth century.

The first reaction of the West to the rediscovery of Herodotus was indeed one of sheer delight, as it well ought to have been. Guarino, who translated the first seventy-one chapters of Herodotus about 1416, repeatedly expressed his joy in reading him. About 1452 Lorenzo Valla translated him entirely; though his translation was not printed until 1474, it made an impression even when it was only in manuscript. Not much later, about 1460, Mattia Palmieri Pisano produced another complete translation into Latin which was never printed. It can be read in an elegant manuscript of the university library of Turin and contains a most significant eulogy of Herodotus. 

The father of history is appreciated not only for his method of working, for his journeyman mind.

But the Italian humanists, while learning, also learning to know his ancient critics. Thucydides had attacked him, knew of course but a few passages by heart, got to know what Aristotle had said: above all they were impressed by his ruthless attack. On top of all that, his contemporaries troubled the relations between Thucydides and his unfortunate Byzantine colleagues. 'Herodotus nequaquam dixeris quam quomodo illam vocant non.' 

The very fact that each translator and editor of Herodotus had chosen to write a prefatory essay was necessary to defend him against Thucydides at the beginning of the sixteenth century. Thucydides, Diodorus and Plutarch had...
HERODOTUS IN THE HISTORY OF HISTORIOGRAPHY

The father of history is appreciated not only for his style, but also for his method of working, for his journeys, for his free and independent mind.

But the Italian humanists, while learning to read Herodotus, were also learning to know his ancient critics. They realized that Thucydides had attacked him, knew of course Cicero’s dubious compliments by heart, got to know what Aristotle, Strabo and Diodorus had said: above all they were impressed by Plutarch’s systematic and ruthless attack. On top of all that, religious and scholarly controversies troubled the relations between the Italian humanists and their unfortunate Byzantine colleagues. The Greek name became disreputable again in many humanistic minds; and the psychological resistance to the belief that Herodotus had been a liar decreased correspondingly. The change in the situation is already clear about 1460. Giovanni Pontano was asked to write a preface for an edition of Valla’s translation of Herodotus that did not materialize. We have this preface. We can see how prudent and reserved Pontano has become. He defends Herodotus, but he knows only too well that there is an old and impressive case against him. Ultimately he admits that in judging Herodotus one must keep in mind that when he wrote the standards of truth were not so strict as in modern times. A generation later, Ludovicus Vives had no difficulty in saying plainly that Herodotus deserved the title of father of lies rather than that of father of history. ‘Herodotus quem verius mendaciorum patrem dixeris quam quomodo illum vocant nonnulli, parentem historiae’. The very fact that each translator and editor of Herodotus felt it necessary to defend him against Thucydides and Plutarch shows that at the beginning of the sixteenth century his reputation was, generally speaking, bad.

We can begin to notice a change of attitude in the preface of I. Camerarius to his edition of Herodotus of 1541. The change becomes complete, the defence of Herodotus against traditional accusations becomes confident and aggressive in the Apologia pro Herodoto by Henricus Stephanus, first published in 1566. It is an interesting coincidence that the Apologia by Stephanus appeared in the year in which Bodin published his Methodus ad facilem historiarum cognitionem. Both Stephanus and Bodin were fighting for a wider historical outlook and had perhaps more points in common than they would have liked to admit. But Bodin could not yet get over the fact that Thucydides, Diodorus and Plutarch had criticized Herodotus so
severely. Stephanus, for once the more independent of the two, definitely rejected the judgment of the ancients. Stephanus’ main argument is that a comparative study of national customs shows Herodotus to be trustworthy. Here the impact of the modern relazioni from distant countries is obvious. What we might call the comparative method of ethnography vindicates Herodotus. This is not the only argument produced by Stephanus. He remarked, for instance, that Herodotus could not be a liar, because he had a religious soul. But the strength of the Apologia pro Herodoto — a work of decisive importance in the history of European historiography — lies in its comparison between Herodotus’ description and modern customs. As is well known, a few years later Henricus Stephanus used this comparison for satirical purposes in the Apologie pour Hérodot, which is no longer a study of Herodotus, but a satire on modern life. We can see the immediate effects of Stephanus’ Apologia pro Herodoto in a book by Loys Le Roy, De la vicissitude ou variété des choses en l’Univers, which appeared in 1576. Loys Le Roy, also know as Ludovicus Regius, had long established his reputation as a pupil and a biographer of Budé and as a translator of Aristotle, when he published his meditation on universal history. He deals at length with Mesopotamia, Egypt, Persia, and Greece, and has an almost unlimited faith in Herodotus. Indeed he puts Herodotus and Thucydides together as the best two historians.

If the new ethnographic research was the main factor in the revaluation of Herodotus, the Reform theory added a second motive. Interest in biblical history was revived, independent enquiries were encouraged up to a point. Herodotus proved to be a useful complement to the Bible. As David Chytraeus put it in 1564, it was providential that Herodotus should begin ‘ubi prophetica historia desinit’. In the second part of the sixteenth century a new interest in Greek and Oriental history developed; it encouraged the study of Herodotus and was in its turn encouraged by a greater trust in his honesty. By the end of the century he had been recognized as the indispensable complement to the Bible in the study of Oriental history. This is not to say that the discussion of Herodotus’ credibility did not go on well beyond the sixteenth century. There were still fierce controversies on this subject in the eighteenth century. Indeed the discussion is still going on as far as particular sections of his work are concerned. But after Henricus Stephanus there was no longer any question of delegating Herodotus among the story-tellers. He was the master of

1 For a different point of view, R. Syme, Tacitus, 2.
2 Abhandlungen zur Griechischen Geschichtskunde.
3 Details in W. Schmid, Geschichte der griech. Lit.
5 Cf. my paper Erodoto e la Storiografia Moderna for other details.
6 Libri XII De Disciplinis (ed. 1612) p. 87.
7 Thesaurus temporum Eusebi Pamphilii (1606, 1572).
and the guide to archaic Greek history and Oriental history. As the
greatest of the sixteenth-century scholars, Joseph Scaliger, said,
Herodotus is ‘scriinium originum graecarum et barbararum, auctor a
doctorum nuncqam deponendus, a semidotois et paedagogis et simiolis
nuncqam tractandus’ . Scaliger himself made Herodotus one of the
corner-stones of ancient chronology. One century later Sir Isaac
Newton drew up chronological tables to ‘make chronology suit with
the course of nature, with astronomy, with sacred history and with
Herodotus the father of history’. The course of nature, astronomy,
sacred history – Herodotus was now moving in very respectable
circles. About the same time, in 1724, the French Jesuit Lafitau
discovered with the help of Herodotus a matriarchal society in America.
His Moeurs des sauvages Amériquains revealed to the world the simple
truth that also the Greeks had once been savages.

The stupendous developments of the study of Greek and Oriental
history in the last three centuries would never have happened without
Herodotus. Trust in Herodotus has been the first condition for the
fruitful exploration of our remote past. The people who went to
excavate Egypt and Mesopotamia had primarily Herodotus as their
guide. But there is something more to Herodotus than this. It is true
that professional historians now mainly work on written evidence.
But anthropologists, sociologists and students of folklore are doing
on oral evidence what to all intents and purposes is historical work.
The modern accounts of explorers, anthropologists and sociologists
about primitive populations are ultimately an independent develop-
ment of Herodotus’ historia. Thus Herodotus is still with us with the
full force of his method of studying not only the present, but also the
past, on oral evidence. It is a strange truth that Herodotus has really
become the father of history only in modern times\(^8\).

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1 For a different point of view, R. Syme, Tacitus (Oxford 1958).
4 Dionysius, Letter to Pompeius, 3, ed. W. Rhys Roberts; Lucian, Herodotus
(21), 1.
5 Cf. my paper Erodoto e la Storiografia Moderna, Aevum 31 (1957) pp. 74–84
for other details.
6 Libri XII De Disciplinis (ed. 1612) p. 87.
7 Thesaurus temporum Eusebii Pamphili (1606), Animadversiones, p. 97 (anno
1572).
8 Compare the excellent paper by H. Strasburger, Herodots Zeitrechnung,
We can claim to have learnt reasonably well of ancient texts made either in the Middle Ages or later. It is true that there will always be cases that Tacitus' Annals and Histories were not written in those centuries; or vice versa that the Consolatio was written in the 1580s. But generally speaking we know enough about texts, language and history to make it real plausible that what we find in those Latin prose compositions of the fourteenth century will not be received as a historical fact.

On the other hand, it would be futile to expect readily to expose a forgery when the forgery is a deliberate one. Indeed, in this case the name of forgery is real and we are tempted to label as a forgery may, then, perfectly honest work attributed to the wrong author. A mention the most trivial example, the Constellation of the Heavens is transmitted among the works of Xenophon, who has a genuine fifth-century work attributed by some to Homer.

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