Jim Whiting

The Life and Times of Herodotus

United States (2006)

TAGS: Athens Divination Graeco-Persian Wars Greek History Hera Pelion

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General information	
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Creators

Jim Whiting , b. 1943
(Author)

Jim Whiting is an American journalist and writer based in Washington State. For 17 years he was the editor of *Northwest Runner* magazine. He has written or edited over 200 children's books on a wide variety of non-fiction topics including history, zoology, and music. He has written biographies of a number of figures from the ancient world in this *Life and Times - Ancient Civilizations* series, as well as many other biographies for young people in the *Profiles in American History* and *Life and Times – Masters of Music* series, also published with Mitchell Lane.

Sources:

archive.org (accessed: October 12, 2019).

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Additional information

Summary

Ch. 1. *A Historic First, and the First History* opens with an image of the Battle of Salamis accompanying a novelistic account of the Athenian army rushing to return to Athens following, as the reader discovers, the Battle of Marathon. Without knowing it, the Athenians are "competing in history's first marathon" (p. 9). The Persians left once they saw the Athenians at their city. "Centuries later, a legend would arise" about a messenger running from the battlefield to the city before dying on arrival (pp. 9–10). This is said to be unlikely, because some people ran much further without dying, such as Pheidippides who ran 300 miles to Sparta and back. Still, the idea inspired the modern race in 1896. The battle itself inspired another first – Herodotus' *Histories*.

Ch. 2. *Sketching a Life.* A map of the lands from Greece to Babylon opens chapter 2. It is labelled "not authoritative". The reader receives an over-arching account of the life of Herodotus, although it is stressed from the outset that very little is certain and what is known is based on limited evidence. It is known that Herodotus took journeys, gave public performances of his writings, and that he wrote the *Histories*. His parents may have been Lyxes and Dryo; his uncle perhaps Panyassis the poet. It is possible that he took part in a revolt at Halicarnassus and had to leave as a result. He lived in Athens for some time but would not have been allowed to become a citizen and own land; that may have encouraged him to move to Thurii, which is probably where he died.

The *Histories* is then introduced. It is explained that in antiquity there were few divisions between branches of learning. *Histories* meant simply "enquiries", and it includes many topics; "recounting events" but also "geography, literature, science, mythology" and more (p. 16). Some elements are fictional, others are things that people told him and he recorded. Herodotus was already a successful performer, now he would combine many things into one great work.

Ch. 3. *The World According to Herodotus.* The famous bust of Herodotus provides the opening image for this chapter, with a caption explaining the Greek rendering of the name. The chapter goes on to explain that Herodotus chose to focus on the origins of the Persian War (*sic*), and that the Greeks regarded this as one of their most significant events. He travelled in Greece and spoken to the few people still alive who took part. Three possible reasons for writing the *Histories* are offered:

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1) Some think that Herodotus wrote the *Histories* because he could see that divisions were growing in Greece and he wanted to remind them of something important that they had in common.

2) People today celebrate those who fought in World War Two as "the Greatest Generation"; Herodotus may have written the *Histories* to celebrate the generation who fought the Persian War in a similar way. He did not manage to prevent "civil war" and Thucydides would go on to describe what happened.

3) Athens now has a reputation for being the ideal ancient city. This was not the case in antiquity and some cities were angry at the Athenians for using the Delian League's money for their own purposes. The Athenians began to want an empire, while the other Greeks did not want to be in one. Herodotus may have been trying to warn the Athenians not to make the same empire-building mistakes that the Persians had made.

Herodotus' introductory remarks about preserving the "great and marvellous deeds" of the Greeks and Persians are outlined. John Marincola is then quoted explaining that Herodotus did not simply demonise the Persians. This is explicitly compared to George W. Bush's reference to the "Axis of Evil" and the Iranians' corresponding remarks about the USA being "Great Satan" (p. 22). J.A.S Evans is then quoted in reference to the classical Greeks' connection between the Persian Wars and the Trojan War. This is linked to Herodotus' references to Troy, followed by an introduction to Croesus. The narrator then draws attention to Herodotus' style noting that he provides a lot of information about Croesus' rise to power, telling many of the stories that people told him during his travels. Croesus' attempt to expand his empire is then retold in summary form by the narrator, including the trial of Delphi. This is then repeated with Cyrus, with the narrator noting that Herodotus, 'details each of Cyrus' conquests: each country's history, culture, and customs (p. 23). It is reiterated that some of Herodotus' cultural information is reliable while some of it is suspect. Herodotus (and the narrator here) then returns to the main narrative: Darius succeeds Cambyses, the Ionian Greeks revolt, Athens and Eretria support the revolt and Darius swears revenge against them.

Ch. 4. *Jolting the Persian Juggernaut*. A map depicts Salamis, Athens, and the Bay of Eleusis. A narrative of the Persian Wars then begins. The inhabitants of Eretria are enslaved after their leaders betray them

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during the siege. The Athenian army confronts the Persian army at Marathon, blocking the road to Athens. The Athenians deliberately weakened their centre so that they could encircle using their wings. The Persians fled to their ships and then arrived at Athens too late. Darius was furious. He began to prepare for a new invasion but was distracted by revolt in Egypt and then died. His son, Xerxes, renewed the war. Xerxes' invasion was a massive logistical enterprise. Athens and Sparta wished to remain free so they agreed to cooperate. Other Greek cities yielded to Persia. The Battle of Thermopylae is described. The evacuation and destruction of Athens follows. Herodotus's role in shaping the narrative is then recalled, noting that he spends a great deal of time on the Battle of Salamis as "fellow Greeks knew the vital role that battle played in Greek history" (p. 29).

The Athenian delegation to Delphi is then detailed. Themistocles' interpretation and desire to fight is then outlined. This is followed by discussion of the allied Greek force's structure – with Eurybiades of Sparta in charge of the fleet, contradicting Themistocles. Themistocles threatens to take all of the Athenian ships to Italy. The other Greeks agreed to follow Themistocles' plan. He lured the Persian fleet in to fight in a narrow space and they were destroyed in the straits of Salamis. This includes Artemisia's contribution to the battle. The narrator notes that while Herodotus was glad of the Greek victory, he celebrates the contribution of Artemisia, former ruler of his home region, the grandmother of Lygdamis who he had revolted against (p.35). Xerxes' famous remarks about men fighting like women and women like men is repeated. The battle of Mycale is mentioned as the end of the Persian Wars and the end of the *Histories*.

Ch. 5. *After Herodotus*. It is noted that the *Histories* did not prevent "civil war" in Greece (p. 39). Thucydides wrote a history of the war that followed, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*. In it he was scathing of Herodotus, and later writers were also critical of him. He remained a popular author, but not amongst scholars. Herodotus became more respected in the twentieth-century and several modern historians are quoted making approving remarks about Herodotus' reliability. 'Some of Herodotus' conclusions seem true today' (p.41): free people fight better than slaves, and war is futile.

FYI sections appear at the end of each chapter on the following topics: Hoplites (p. 11), The Ionian Greeks (p. 17), The Delphic Oracle (p. 25), Triremes (p. 37) and Thucydides (p. 42).

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A chronology timeline of the life of Herodotus follows, and after it another featuring events of ancient Greek history more broadly. There is a section of notes, a Further Reading section, a glossary with pronunciation guide, and an index.

Analysis

The Life and Times of Herodotus is essentially an account of the Persian Wars that encourages readers to consider the role played by Herodotus in shaping the narrative of events. A novelistic opening grabs the reader's attention before there is a shift into a more typical history tone. The work attempts to help young readers understand the literary milieu in which Herodotus was writing – explaining that modern genres did not exist in the same way and that Herodotus was establishing a new field. This may be the first time that readers have encountered the idea that literature may be different in different period or that historical evidence should be considered in its historical context and in that sense this is a very valuable contribution to their understanding of history. It is less good at tackling the different ways of thinking about 'truth', so there is still a rather blunt contrast between things in the *Histories* that are 'true' and things which are made up or were told to Herodotus but untrue. The idea of things having a non-literal truth, or being true-in-a-manner-of-speaking is not explored, nor is the idea of how one might tell the difference between true and untrue. There is reference to the inclusion of elements of geography or sociology in the *Histories*, however these elements are not really explored in the work, which focuses almost exclusively on politico-military developments. There is also no reference to what an intensely moral work the *Histories* is. The role of the gods and the role of history as moral education are not explored. Despite these (arguable) omissions, this work does more than most to prompt young readers to realise that ancient narrative histories were shaped by real people.

The question is raised of why the *Histories* were written in the first place. Again, it is good to prompt readers to consider motive and how that may affect the content of a text. Three possibilities are given: to prevent a civil war, to celebrate the participants in the war, and to warn the Athenians not to make the same mistake as the Persians in empire-building (pp. 19–20). The answer to this question is initially left open, but references at the end (p. 39) suggest that there is a correct answer – which is apparently option one. This is a rather surprising

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choice and it is still more surprising that it is framed as a case of Herodotus 'failing' to stop the war. This may have been intended to act as a bridging device to link to what happened after the Persian Wars, but it does rather give the unnecessary impression of Herodotus underachieving. "Civil war" (pp. 19 & 39) is a somewhat misleading term to use for inter-Greek fighting, but it is perhaps a close enough term that would be familiar for young readers.

The introduction to the *Histories* takes care to explore the idea that Herodotus does not demonise the Persians in his work (pp. 21–22). This helps the reader to understand the nature of the *Histories* and also draws their attention to issues of rhetoric and characterisation in all media. The explicit reference to modern hyperbole from both sides of the Iraq War encourage the reader to extrapolate beyond the ancient example to consider their own world, and it also discourages the idea that moderns are inherently superior to their forbears. A similar openness about imperfections amongst the ancient Greeks informs the unusual decision to be fairly frank about the divisions between them. As such there is reference to the Eretrians being betrayed to the Persians by their leaders; differences of opinion amongst the Athenians about whether or not to fight (p. 27 and 30); some Greek cities joining Xerxes (p. 29); Themistocles threatening to withdraw from the alliance (p. 31; *Histories* 8.62); and the descent into fighting following the Persian Wars. Ancient Greece is celebrated but not presented as utopia.

For the most part, the work focuses on peoples rather than individuals. It is the 'Athenians' at Marathon without reference to Miltiades or Callimachus (or, more surprisingly, to the Plataeans). There is no reference to Leonidas at Thermopylae, but rather to the Spartans and their allies. Themistocles and Eurybiades are mentioned by name within the Salamis narrative, although it is hard to identify why they are treated differently. Decisions made by the Persians are framed as those of Darius and Xerxes as named individuals. Despite being named, these figures are not treated in detail. There is little sense of Darius' life beyond the invasion of Greece and it is erroneously claimed that he died in battle (p. 28); Xerxes is referred to somewhat misleadingly as an "emperor" (p. 29). Generally the references to group action help to express the democratic ideal of community and consensus over individual will, and this idea is reinforced at the end with the narrator's conclusion that, as Herodotus says, people do better when they are free rather than subject to a tyrant.

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The front cover features a bust of Herodotus surrounded the frame of African-style spears on a background of Egyptian hieroglyphs that forms the cover of all of the books in this series. The combination of bust and hieroglyphs seem to express "antiquity"; the Egyptian element of the *Histories* does not really feature in the work, however, but it is potentially useful to suggest that something beyond Greece is relevant. Herodotus' travels are discussed, as is the probable identity of his parents, his time in Athens, and the possibility that local interest drove his appreciation for Artemisia. All of these elements help to humanise Herodotus, and while the book remains firmly focused on the developments of the wars rather than on any other aspect of the 'times' of Herodotus, this personal element offers a reminder that he was a real person whose life shaped his views. The final chapter addresses Herodotus' reputation over the years, and although it is somewhat overstated at points, it is a fairly reliable account and does a great deal towards urging readers to recognise that authors have different reputations in different periods and that ancient authors connect us to *all* periods of time, not only to antiquity.

Chapter 4, in which the main narrative of the war is given, is by far the longest chapter in the book. This enables attention to be given to strategic and tactical aspects of three of the major battles of the wars: Marathon, Thermopylae, and Salamis. There is nothing on the use of or avoidance of archers at Marathon, but one receives a good impression of the use of massed ranks and wings. For Thermopylae and Salamis there is an explanation of the benefits a smaller force can gain from fighting in a confined space. The Battles of Artemisium and Mycale are mentioned by name although no detail is provided. The Battle of Plataea is not included at all although it features at great length in the *Histories*. There are three maps, which help to orientate the reader, although they are labelled 'not authoritative' which readers may find disconcerting. Despite the label they are generally accurate although the first is a little misleading on the position of Eretria (p. 12). It is a little unfortunate that the book repeats the erroneous assertion that the pronouncements of the Pythia at Delphi were caused by poisoning with natural gasses (p. 25), but as this is a widely reported theory it is easy to see how a non-specialist author may have picked it up.

The decision to place an ancient author in a collection of biographies about the ancient world makes the welcome suggestion that literary and philosophical figures are as important to remember as military or political ones. This also helps to draw young reader's attention to the nature of sources and may help to increase the sophistication with

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	which they think about text and about the past.
Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Athens Divination Graeco-Persian Wars Greek History Hera Pelion
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Adversity Conflict Death Freedom Heroism Historical figures History Nation Transformation Violence War

Further Reading

Bridges, E., E. Hall and P. J. Rhodes, eds., *Cultural Responses to the Persian Wars: Antiquity to the Third Millennium*, Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2007.

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Sonya Nevin, "Entry on: The Life and Times of Herodotus by Jim Whiting ", peer-reviewed by Susan Deacy and Lisa Maurice. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2019). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/873. Entry version as of September 12, 2025.

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