

THE LANDMARK
HERODOTUS



THE HISTORIES

Edited by Robert B. Strassler

A New Translation by Andrea L. Purvis

Introduction by Rosalind Thomas

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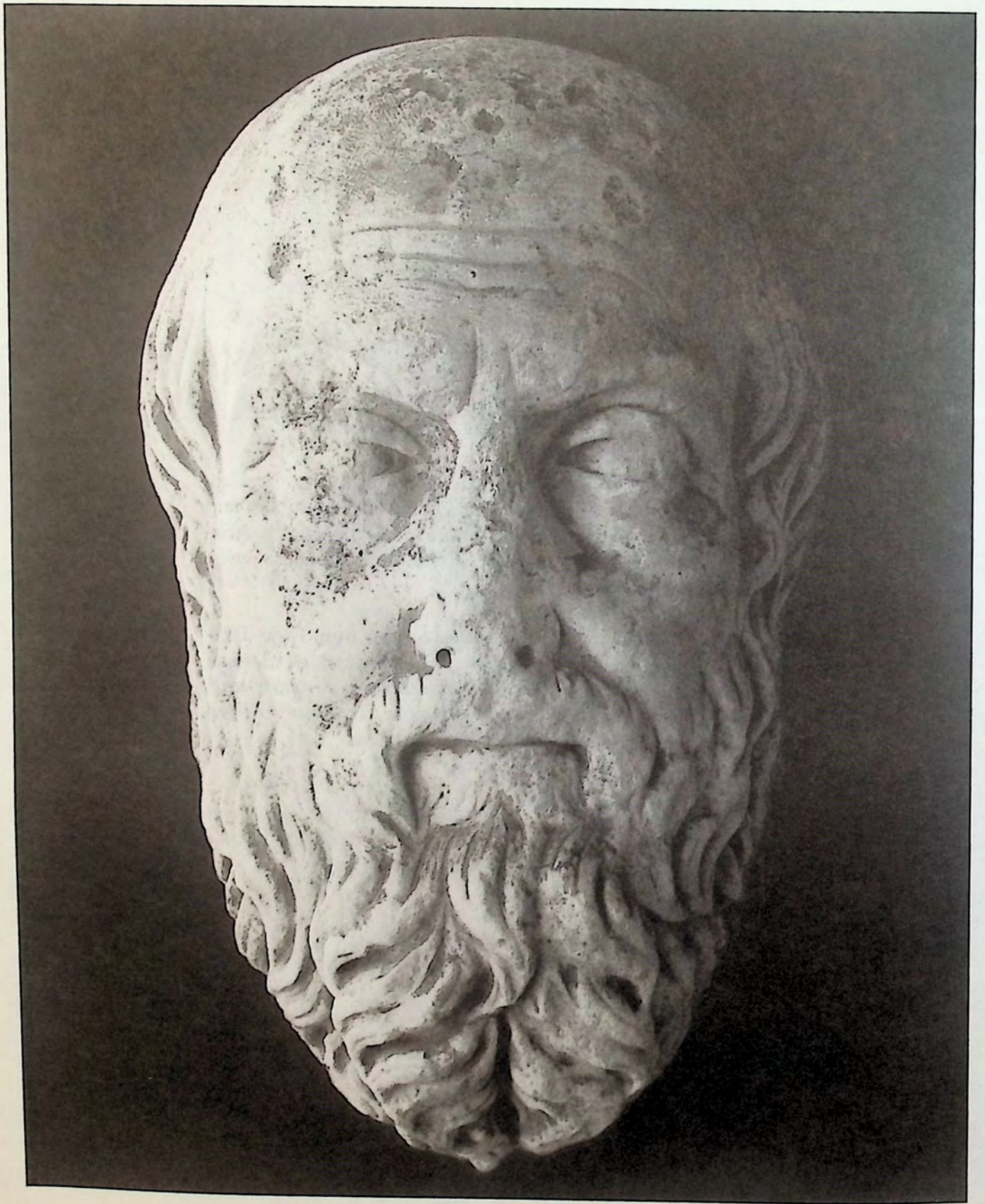


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THE LANDMARK HERODOTUS

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THE LANDMARK
HERODOTUS

THE HISTORIES

A New Translation by Andrea L. Purvis
with Maps, Annotations, Appendices, and Encyclopedic Index

Edited by Robert B. Strassler

With an Introduction by Rosalind Thomas



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INTRODUCTION

Rosalind Thomas

1. Opening Remarks

§1.1. Herodotus' *Histories* trace the conflict between the Greeks and the Persians which culminated in the Persian Wars in the great battles of Thermopylae, Salamis, Plataea, and Mycale (480–479),^a a generation or so before he was writing. He described his theme as comprising both the achievements of Greeks and barbarians, and also the reasons why they came into conflict (Book 1, Proem). This suggests that he sought the causes of the conflict in factors that took one back deep into the past and into the characteristics of each society. He implies that he saw the deep-seated causes in cultural antagonism of Greek and non-Greek, but he went out of his way to describe the achievements and customs of many non-Greek peoples with astonishing sensitivity and lack of prejudice. The *Histories* are the first work in the Western tradition that are recognizably a work of history to our eyes, for they cover the recent human past (as opposed to a concentration on myths and legends), they search for causes, and they are critical of different accounts. Herodotus' own description of them as an inquiry, a "*historiē*," has given us our word "history," and he has been acknowledged as the "father of history." He also has a claim to be the first to write a major work on geography and ethnography. His interests were omnivorous, from natural history to anthropology, from early legend to the events of the recent past: he was interested in the nature of the Greek defense against the Persians, or the nature of Greek liberty, as well as in stranger and more exotic tales about gold-digging ants or other wondrous animals in the East. The *Histories* are the first long work in prose (rather than verse) which might rival the Homeric epics in scale of conception and length. Shorter works in prose had appeared before, but the *Histories* must in their time have been revolutionary.

§1.2. Who, then, was Herodotus? As with most ancient Greek authors, we have little reliable information, and the later ancient biographers may have invented biographical "facts" by drawing from the content of the *Histories* themselves, as was common in ancient biographies of writers. He was born in Halicarnassus^a in Asia Minor,^b now modern Bodrum in western Turkey. He spent much of his life in exile,

Intro.1.1a All dates in this edition of Herodotus and in its supporting materials are B.C.E. (Before the Common Era), unless otherwise specified.

Intro.1.2a Halicarnassus: Map Intro.1.

Intro.1.2b Asia Minor (Asia): Map Intro.1, locator.

spending some time in Samos,^c some in Athens,^d and apparently ending up in Thurii,^e the Athenian Panhellenic colony founded in south Italy (Aristotle in the fourth century knew him as Herodotus of Thurii). The *Histories* themselves provide the evidence for his extensive travels in the Greek world, Asia Minor, Phoenicia, Egypt and North Africa,^f and perhaps the Black Sea^g (see below). Unlike in many modern travelogues, the main focus of interest is not on the traveling itself but on the information it yields, so again the personal elements are not extensive. His life spanned much of the fifth century: here there is no reason to doubt the ancient tradition that he was born at roughly the time of the Persian Wars (480–479), and he probably lived into the 420s, since the *Histories* make references to events in Greece early in the Peloponnesian War of 431–404. It is usually thought that he was active as researcher and writer from the 450s to the 420s. The *Histories* clearly constituted a life's work.

2. The Historical Background

§2.1. The beginning of this period saw the triumph of the Greek mainland states over the might of the Persian Empire, first in the initial invasion of 490 and the battle of Marathon,^a then in the second invasion of 480/79, with the battles of Thermopylae, Salamis, Plataea, and finally Mycale^b in Asia Minor. This unexpected victory resonated in Greek consciousness through the fifth century and indeed beyond, and it is important to recall this when reading Herodotus, who was researching a generation or two after the Greek victory. It helped crystallize Greeks' attitudes to their own way of life and values, intensified their supreme distrust of monarchy and tyranny, and shaped their attitude to the Persians. In more practical terms, Athens' naval success in the Persian Wars and its enterprise immediately after led to the creation of the Athenian Empire, which started as an anti-Persian league and lasted for almost three-quarters of a century (479–404). As the Spartans^c were increasingly reluctant to continue anti-Persian activity into the Hellespont and Asia Minor, the Athenians were free to create their maritime league composed of many smaller Greek states situated around the Aegean and up into the Hellespont.^d Athenian power grew steadily and Athens even tried a disastrous expedition to help Egypt rebel against the Persian King. As her radical democracy developed from the 460s, conflict arose between her and the other powerful Greek states, particularly Corinth^e and Sparta and the members of Sparta's Peloponnesian League. By the late 430s tensions had reached their height. War broke out in 431 between Athens and her allies and Sparta and hers. Athens was now a "tyrant city," the Corinthians claimed (*Thucydides* 1.122.3; generally, 1.68–71, 1.120–124), and Greece must now be freed from Athens. Greece had been freed from the Persians^f only to be enslaved by Athens. The great historian of this later war, Thucydides, was successor and rival to Herodotus. As he makes his Athenian speakers remark in the opening book of his history, they are weary of pointing out that the Athenian Empire is justified

Intro.1.2c Samos: Map Intro.1.
Intro.1.2d Athens: Map Intro.1.
Intro.1.2e Thurii: Map Intro.1, locator.
Intro.1.2f Phoenicia, Egypt, and North Africa (Libya):
Map Intro.2.
Intro.1.2g Euxine (Black) Sea: Map Intro.1, locator.
Intro.2.1a Marathon: Map Intro.1.

Intro.2.1b Battle sites of 480: Thermopylae and Salamis,
of 479, Plataea and Mycale: Map Intro.1.
Intro.2.1c Sparta: Map Intro.1.
Intro.2.1d Aegean Sea: Map Intro.1. Hellespont: Map
Intro.1, locator.
Intro.2.1e Corinth: Map Intro.1.
Intro.2.1f Persia: Map Intro.2.

on the grounds that the Athenians did most to defeat the Persians (e.g., *Thucydides* 1.73.2–75.2: “although we are rather tired of continually bringing up this subject [the Persian War],” 1.73.2). In other words, the Persian Wars were still very much a living part of Greek politics in the 430s and 420s and the period during which Herodotus was researching. They played an important role in the rhetoric and diplomacy of the time. Athens could and did claim that she had done more than any other Greek city to help Greece keep her freedom; Sparta and Corinth now asserted that Athens herself was enslaving Greece. Freedom is central to Herodotus’ *Histories*, and it played a crucial part in inter-state political argument and antagonism in the later fifth century.

§2.2. Herodotus’ *Histories* need to be seen in part against this background, even though in formal terms they describe events only down to the end of the Persian Wars in 479. For he takes as his explicit theme the conflict between the Greeks and the barbarians, as he puts it in the introduction, and after tracing this conflict back to the earliest times, he gradually works up to the full narrative of the Greek-Persian conflict in the Ionian^a Revolt of 499–494 (Books 5–6), and to the two Persian invasions of mainland Greece of 490 and 480 (Books 6–9). Herodotus’ *Histories* stop on the brink of the creation of the Athenian Empire: they end their main narrative at the point where the Greeks in Asia Minor, helped by the Greek fleet under the Spartan Leotychidas, have won a decisive victory against the Persian forces at Mycale in Asia Minor—on the very same day on which the Greek army in central Greece under Pausanias had won the victory at Plataea, which forced the Persians to withdraw entirely from Greece. The Asia Minor Greeks were taken into the anti-Persian alliance of the Greek allies (9.106), and the victorious Greek forces sailed up to the Hellespont to continue aggressive operations against Persia and free more Greek cities. The Spartans and Peloponnesians went home, fatally leaving the Athenians in charge (9.114; though they were to send another commander out later), and Herodotus’ narrative ends with the Athenian actions in the Hellespont, which many scholars have seen as an ominous portent of the future (9.120).

§2.3. If we imagine Herodotus trying to collect accounts, to take oral testimony, and to gather personal or collective memories about the Persian Wars, then we can assume that he would have been talking to people who had actually been involved, who perhaps had fought in the war or whose relations had done so; and since the effects of the Persian Wars were still immediate and strong, and charges of Medism^a still potent, it is hard to imagine that his research was either simple or straightforward. His claims to set the record straight and to record both the brave and the cowardly still had resonances for later generations. Plutarch still resented his remarks about certain Greek cities, particularly Corinth and Thebes,^b several centuries later, in the late first century C.E., in his fascinatingly and curiously petty essay “On the Malice of Herodotus,” where he also tried in his own way, rather ineffectually, to set the record straight. Excuses for why the Argives^c did not help against the Persians

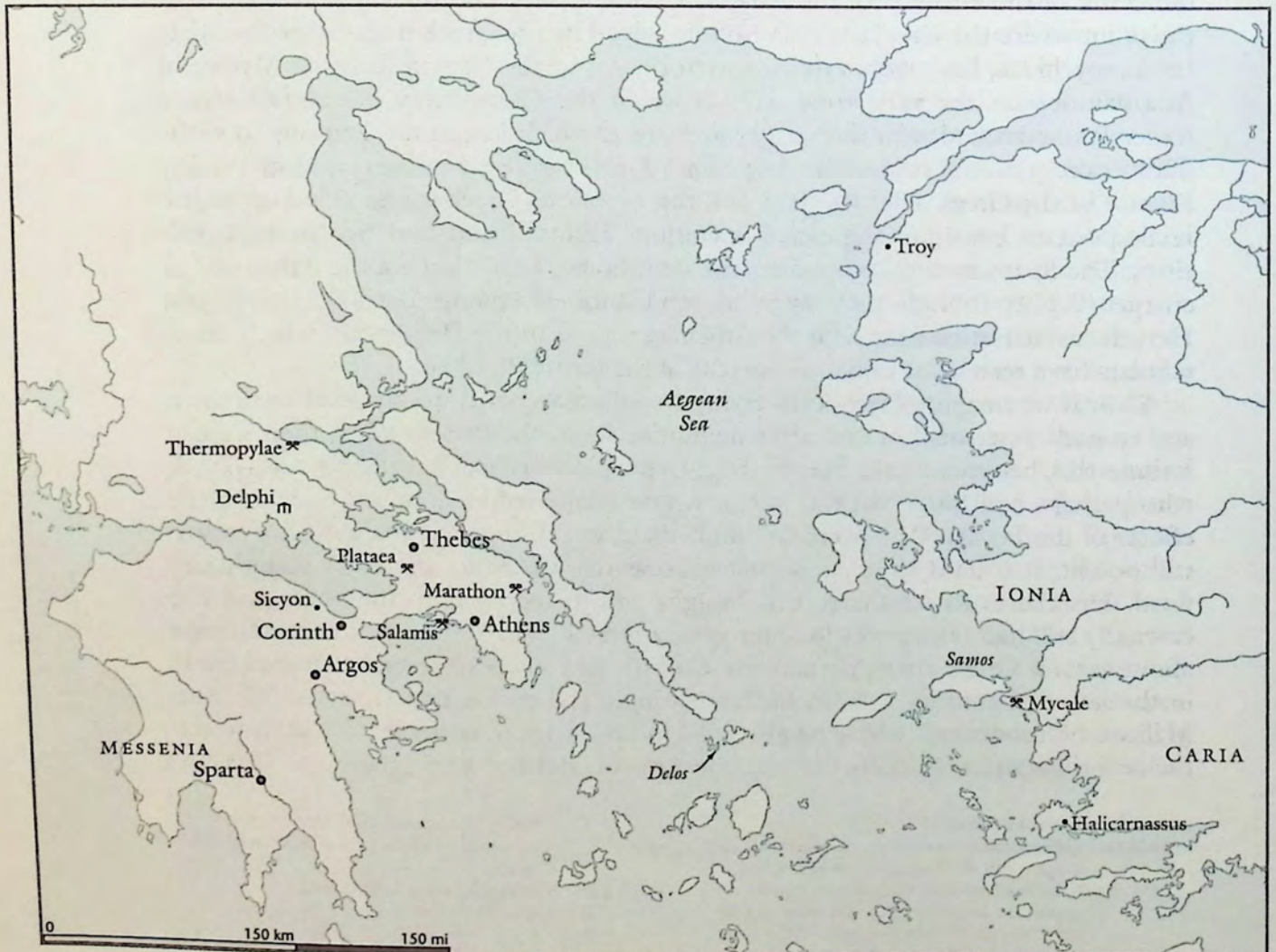
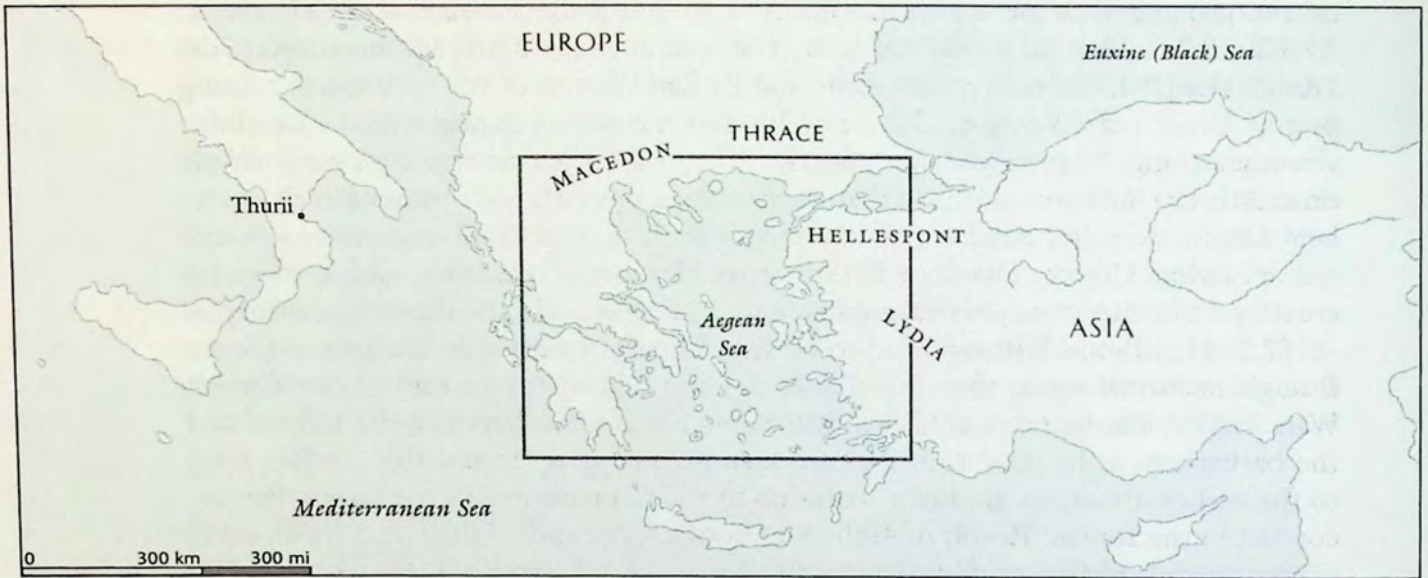
Intro.2.2a Ionian: Map Intro.1.

Intro.2.3a Those Greeks who accepted Persian rule and fought with the Persians were accused of “Medism” by those Greeks who fought against the Persians. That they were said to have “medized” is an extension of the Greek habit of using the words “Mede” and

“Persian” interchangeably, although the Medes were a people quite distinct from the Persians.

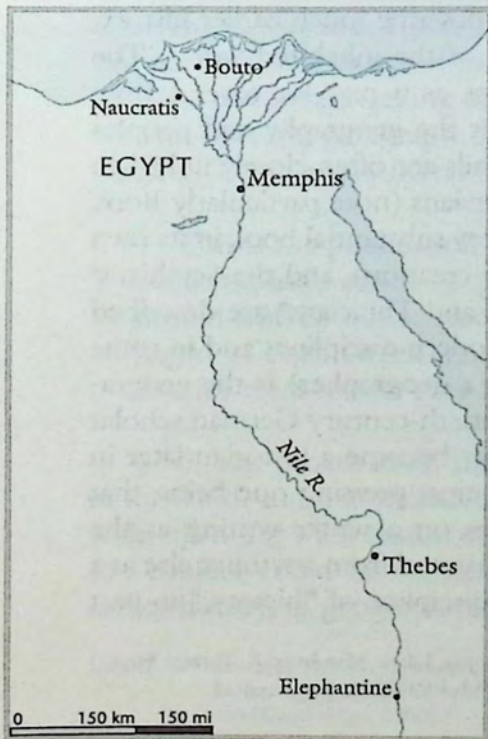
Intro.2.3b Thebes (Boeotia): Map Intro.1.

Intro.2.3c Argos: Map Intro.1.



MAP INTRO.1*

*See the Editor's Preface and the Key to Maps for an explanation of map layout, symbols, and typography.



MAP INTRO.2

(7.148–152) were still important in the later fifth century and beyond. In fact, Herodotus knows well that he is often controversial. For instance, he notes that he is saying something unpopular in declaring that the Athenians in fact did most to defeat the Persians (7.139): modern historians would usually accept this opinion, so why was it so unpopular at the time? Presumably the prevailing view in Greece was that the Spartans were the great heroes of the war and thus he was challenging that. Even more important, the Athenians were using precisely this boast to justify their empire. The fact that Herodotus admitted his judgment was unpopular was not so much a straightforward sign of “pro-Athenian feelings” on his part as an acknowledgment that he had to have good reasons—which he does and which he gives at length—for going against the popular view. He may also have been hinting indirectly at some morals or warnings to be drawn from Greek history down to 479 and applied to the period after the wars. At any rate the *Histories* end their narrative oddly: the last but one paragraph reads, “and that was all that happened in the course of the year” (9.121).^d It is as if he was discreetly hinting that many important things were certainly going to occur in the following years. The very last paragraph (9.122) takes us back to a warning given by Cyrus the Great, the founder of the Persian Empire, in the very early years of Persian expansion that if they expand too much and move into rich, luxurious lands, they will become soft and cease to be rulers. In this unexpected flashback, one could simply read a moralizing tale about the rise and decline of Persian might, but Herodotus’ audience could also, if they were so minded, see in it a warning about the more recently arisen Athenian Empire.

§2.4. What are the *Histories*? Far more than the history of the Persian Wars, they purport to trace the Greek-barbarian hostility back to earliest mythical times (1.1–5), and they describe the geography of most of the known world of the time. They trace relations between peoples and cities in such a way as to describe much earlier history, and they describe the customs of many of the peoples of the inhabited world. The expansion of the Persian Empire into new areas serves as a peg for several large sections—often misleadingly called “digressions”—about the geography and peoples of those areas. The geographical and ethnographical details are often closely linked to the success or failure of those peoples in resisting the Persians (note particularly Book 4 on the Scythians). The section on Egypt runs to one very substantial book in its own right (note, though, that the book divisions were a later creation), and the Scythians^a receive the second longest section. Ethiopians, Libyans, and Thracians^b are described in detail. It might be tempting to see this in terms of modern disciplines and in some sort of hierarchy: is he an anthropologist, a historian, or a geographer? Is the geography subservient to the history, or, as the great early-twentieth-century German scholar Jacoby argued, did he start out as a geographer and only become a historian later in life? But there are huge problems with these ideas, the most pressing one being that they impose modern conceptions of modern disciplines on a writer writing at the “beginning,” before history has even been defined or separated from anything else as a discipline. Herodotus helped create the concept of the discipline of “history,” in part

Intro.2.3d Translation throughout the Introduction differs from that in this volume.
Intro.2.4a Scythia: Map Intro.2.

Intro.2.4b Ethiopia, Libya: Map Intro.2. Thrace: Map Intro.1, locator.

by stressing and criticizing his sources and accepted traditions, but it was his successor Thucydides who really solidified and in fact narrowed the idea of history as a critical study of past events (and only past events, as opposed to ethnography, mythology, or geography). This definition of “history” as the study of past political and military events is something of an anachronism for Herodotus, who, after all, included so much more in his “inquiry”: we would be applying a later conception to an earlier achievement which was conceived in earlier and therefore different terms (see below). It also ignores the complex structure of his work and its overall unity, for in the *Histories* geography and customs have a large explanatory role in the course of events, and the interweaving of geography, ethnography, and the narrative of events is very finely done, not as one might expect if one or the other area was somehow tacked on later. Besides, “wonders” and achievements are “worthy of relation/telling” (*axiologotatoi*), in Herodotus’ phrase, in their own right. Egypt was worthy of a longer description because it had more marvels than any other place (2.35.1). Wonders were simply part of his subject matter.

§2.5. Herodotus’ own conception of his work is that it is a “*historiē*,” a Greek word for “inquiry” which through Herodotus’ own use has become our word for history. Not only did it not yet mean “history,” but in the second half of the fifth century, *historiē* inquiry seems to have had particular connotations, as I hope I have shown in my book.³ It was a term of “science” in the sense that it was accompanied by the desire to discover the truth about the world, with a degree of critical rigor, concern for proof, and respect for evidence (though hardly to the degree expected of modern science). We encounter the term “inquiry into nature” for natural science, or “inquiry into medicine” for the attempt to understand medicine and its relation to human nature. *Historiē* was an all-encompassing term that was by no means limited to research into the past; indeed Herodotus may have been the first to use it for research that included past human actions. Its appearance in his opening sentence was surely meant to signal to his audience that here was no rehash of the old myths, no mere uncritical retelling of stories, but a modern work of critical inquiry.

The opening paragraph of the proem sets out clearly that his subject was wide-ranging (I give a very literal translation):

This is the publication [or display *apodexis*] of the inquiry of Herodotus of Halicarnassus, which he presents in the hope that the achievements of men should not be obliterated by time, nor that the great and wonderful deeds [*erga*] of both Greeks and barbarians should be without their due fame, and also for what reason they fought each other. (Book 1, Proem)

§2.6. The proem itself, then, states that his subject is the events and achievements of mankind, and that included both Greeks and barbarians. The final clause is similarly wide-open: for what reason or cause. How did he conceive of causation? The causes of the conflict could be sought in mythical origins, in the buildup of antagonism in earlier history, in geographical layout and proximity, in way of life, customs, and over-

Intro.2.5a Rosalind Thomas, *Herodotus in Context: Ethnography, Science and the Art of Persuasion* (Cambridge, 2000).

all attitudes, for instance the conflicting values of Greeks and non-Greeks which are certainly visible in the *Histories*. The political and social strengths of different peoples change, too, in the course of the *Histories*, so that Greeks were not always free, and non-Greeks were worthy of investigation in their own right. His proem therefore describes the idea of his work in terms which could virtually encompass everything which actually appears in the *Histories*. Of course, writers are at liberty to do more or less than they promise at the start, but it is striking how wide-open Herodotus' themes are from the start. It is interesting to compare the way Thucydides opened his *History* with a far more focused summary, surely with an eye on his predecessor Herodotus:

Thucydides the Athenian wrote [*xunnegrapse*] the history of the war between the Peloponnesians and the Athenians, beginning at the moment it broke out and believing that it would be a great war and more worthy of relation than any that had preceded it. (*Thucydides* 1.1.1: Crawley)

§2.7. Instantly it is obvious that this is to be a more concentrated, sharply focused account of a war—one war—and not the wider “inquiry,” nor a baggy, all-encompassing account of everything that deserves to have its fame preserved. And he claims that his war was greater than earlier ones, which includes both the Trojan War, sung by Homer, and the Persian War. Rivalry with Homer and Herodotus is emphatically signaled. Turning back from Thucydides to Herodotus, we are struck by the wide-arching aims of the Herodotean proem: this was indeed going to encompass far more than the narrative of the Persian Wars alone.

§2.8. Here it may be useful to say something about the structure of the *Histories*, which is related to their all-encompassing and inclusive subject matter. As we saw above, the large sections on the geography and customs of various peoples tend to be pegged onto the larger narrative framework of conquest: when the Persians or before them, on a lesser scale, the Lydians^a try to conquer a people, these people are described. Thus the history of the Medes, who conquered the Persians (1.102) but were later subjected by them, is included in the description of their relations with the Persians (1.95–104, the Medes rise up against Assyria; see also 1.123–130, Cyrus and the Persians rise up against the Medes).

§2.9. Right at the start of the *Histories* the grand theme of the conflict between Greeks and non-Greeks is launched, and the structure reflects this. We start immediately after the proem with a curious set of opening myths, contrary stories by learned Persians, Greeks, and Phoenicians, about mythical abductions of various women by Persians, Phoenicians, or Greeks (1.1–5): the tit-for-tat of wrongs and retaliations is thus traced right back to mythical times. But however we interpret this opening—probably a parody of a certain type of argument about causes of wars—Herodotus pulls the inquiry back onto safer ground almost immediately, into a period more susceptible to historical inquiry, by saying that he is not going to declare whether any of these mythical abductions happened in this way, but he is

Intro.2.8a Lydia: Map Intro.1, locator.

going to proceed with the man he knows was the first to commit unjust acts against the Greeks (1.5.3). This marks a clear division between what he knows and the unstable and unreliable tales of a more distant past. He then proceeds to tell of Croesus of Lydia, who attacked the Greeks of Asia Minor in the mid-sixth century (1.6). This is the period safely within the range of historical knowledge. From now on in Book 1, the narrative thread follows Croesus' rise and fall as king of Lydia, the rise of the Median^a kingdom and then that of the Persian Empire, the Persian conquest of Lydia and other territories, and the gradual escalation of hostility between Persia and the Greek world.

§2.10. It is, however, the numerous "flashbacks," frequently called "digressions," within this narrative that the modern reader often finds hard to follow. Attached to this main narrative are many inserted sections which explain circumstances, describe the relevant geography, trace how such a situation has arisen, or describe the state of a city which now becomes involved in the main narrative. A simple example occurs in the narrative of Croesus' expansionist plans. Croesus king of Lydia first inquires about possible allies, as part of his plan to go to war (1.56). This inquiry forms a peg for a description of the major Greek ethnic groups, the Dorians and Ionians (1.56–58). Then as "Croesus learned that the Athenians, inhabitants of the foremost city of the Ionians, were ruled at this time by the tyrant Peisistratos son of Hippocrates" (1.59.1), we are given an account of the mid-sixth-century factional strife in Athens and Peisistratos' three periods of power. We thus have an explanation within another explanation, a description hanging from another description, all of which are in fact important to our understanding of the train of events.^a In a form of "ring composition," Herodotus returns neatly at the end of this to his main narrative and clearly signals the end of the section on Athens with the sentence "Such, Croesus learned, was the condition of the Athenians" (1.65.1). The ring is complete, and the ancient reader would be alerted to this by the very method of ring composition. The modern terms "digression" or "excursus" imply that these passages are less important, possibly off the point, getting off the main theme, but this is to impose modern conceptions of linear structure and relevance and an anachronistically negative slant. The nearest Herodotus gets to describing his principle is in Book 4 (30.1): "My account goes searching from the start for extra material [literally "additions"]." The word "additions" carries a more positive charge than "digression" and is the excuse for moving from the effects of the cold on cattle in Scythia to a different but equally odd fact about the impossibility of breeding mules in Elis. The searching for extra information is part and parcel of the wide-open nature of his inquiry.

3. The Intellectual and Moral World of Herodotus

§3.1. In all this it is hard to see Herodotus as anything but revolutionary: as the great scholar and historian Momigliano put it vividly, "There was no Herodotus

Intro.2.9a Media: Map Intro.2.

Intro.2.10a And this information is also vital to our understanding of later events which Herodotus describes subsequently, when the Athenians

drive out the last Peisistratid tyrant (5.65) and form a new rudimentary, democratic government (5.66), from which they draw the strength and will (5.78) to resist the Persians.

before Herodotus.”^a We can pick out earlier writers who pursued one or another element of the many areas of inquiry that appear in Herodotus’ *Histories*. Of these Hekataios was the greatest, writing c. 500. He wrote a geographical work enumerating the peoples and places on a circumnavigation of the Mediterranean (*Periodos Gēs*) and tried to collect, systematize, and rationalize the many contradictory legends of the Greeks in a work called *Genealogies*. Other prose writers may have written short works on Lydian history and Persian history, but none of these have survived in anything but a few fragments, and in any case, the great mass of Herodotus’ *Histories* draws on oral traditions and witnesses rather than written works. With the exception of Homer, the “predecessors” of Herodotus seem only to make Herodotus’ achievement all the more monumental, and we can perhaps understand the *Histories* more if we view Herodotus not so much in comparison with the few shadowy writers somewhat before his time, but against the background of developments in his own contemporary world.

§3.2. The supreme model for a narrative on this scale was provided by Homer, the *Iliad* as a narrative of war, the *Odyssey* of travels. There are clear Homeric features in Herodotus from the very opening, where he declares that his aim is partly to ensure that fame (*kleos*) is preserved from the ravages of time. The larger structure owes something to Homer, and similarities bring out the Homeric resonances and parallels for Greek readers, who would have been very familiar with the epics. At the start of Xerxes’ great invasion of Greece, there is a long catalog of his forces (7.61–99), which is clearly reminiscent of the great catalog of ships of the Greek forces at Troy^a in the *Iliad* (*Iliad* 2.484–779). Dreams play a large part in the Xerxes narrative as he is persuaded to go ahead with his disastrous expedition against Greece by a series of dreams sent by the gods to ensure that, despite all arguments raised against the expedition, he nevertheless continues with his plans to invade Greece (Book 7, beginning). Similarly, early in the *Iliad*, Agamemnon is sent a deceptive dream which leads him to believe that the capture of Troy could be imminent (*Iliad* 2.1–40)—though here, as the circumstances and effects are so different, we may wonder if the deceptive dream is simply a feature of the Greek conception of how dreams and the divine may function in human life and, as such, common to both Homer and Herodotus. Herodotus uses phrases and expressions that are reminiscent of Homeric ones, and the practice of giving speeches to the actors in his *Histories* continues what is originally a Homeric practice.^b

§3.3. Yet there are sharp differences between them, too, and Herodotus on several occasions distances himself from the Homeric account in such a way as to emphasize his superior methods and judgment. Writers began to write in prose (as opposed to verse) in the sixth century for serious attempts to elucidate the grand workings of the cosmos and to *distance* themselves from the dominant poetic tradition. Most early philosophy was in prose, and the early rationalization and ordering

Intro.3.1a A. Momigliano, “The Place of Herodotus in the History of Historiography,” Chapter 8 of his *Studies in Historiography* (London, 1966), 129.

Intro.3.2a Troy: Map Intro.1.

Intro.3.2b D. Boedeker, “Epic Heritage and Mythical Patterns in Herodotus,” Chapter 5 in *Brill’s*

Companion to Herodotus, and S. Hornblower, “Introduction,” in Hornblower, ed., *Greek Historiography* (Oxford, 1994), 65–7 on Homeric speech and rhythms. Note also S. Said, “Herodotus and Tragedy,” Chapter 6 in *Brill’s Companion to Herodotus*, for an excellent analysis of the tragic in Herodotus.

of the myths by writers such as Hekataios were written in a rather dry prose. By Herodotus' time, then, prose was the medium for serious investigation into the world, although Homer's authority was still enormous. We can often see Herodotus distancing his account and his whole approach from the Homeric vision. One example we saw above, where Herodotus proclaimed (effectively) that it was only the recent past that could properly be known as a subject of real knowledge (1.5.3). In Herodotus' idea that wisdom comes from travel, which he implies in his description of his own research and makes still clearer in the account of the travels of Solon the lawgiver (1.29–33), we might see echoes of the Homeric Odysseus, "who saw many cities and came to know their minds" (*Odyssey* 1.3). But Herodotus often demolishes traditions and criticizes myths. He takes apart the veracity of basic elements of Homer's *Iliad* in a remarkable section of Book 2, where he argues that Helen never reached Troy but remained in Egypt for the war, and he believes Homer rejected this version as inappropriate for epic (2.113–120). Herodotus often recorded traditions as they stood, as is often pointed out, but he also corrected them, and stressed that he had the truth. He seems deliberately to mark his distance from the great epics in his very opening sentence (Proem): "the publication of his inquiry" (*apodexis historiēs*) is an expression which belongs to the intellectual currents of the second half of the fifth century, and it is placed just before he expresses the desire to preserve the fame of great achievements, which is an entirely Homeric idea. Then the next five paragraphs (1.1–5) juxtapose legends of various women being seized in rationalized versions of the old legends, with accounts about the past which he characterizes as what "I know." The epic poet appealed to the Muse to give him his story: "Sing, goddess, of the wrath of Peleus' son Achilles" (*Iliad* 1.1), the oral poet calling upon the Muse for inspiration and the very material of his epic. Herodotus' opening, on the other hand, signals to his audience that his sources are actually his own inquiries, his own travels, his own experience (or *autopsy*). The hint at external sources of information is couched in terms of a new, entirely human-based search for knowledge.

§3.4. Herodotus' awareness of his sources, the way he actually mentions his methods and distinguishes between what he has seen and what he has only heard, enable him to delineate his work as a new kind of "inquiry." For instance, he emphasizes that the Egyptians keep records of the past and therefore are "the most learned" of any people he knows (2.77), and he claims the Egyptian priests as sources of information throughout Book 2. Or, more implausibly, he declares that he himself saw a great marvel at the site of the battle of Pelusium, where he was shown the Egyptian and Persian skulls which still lay there in separate piles, and he claims an identical experience at the battlefield of Papremis (3.12; see further below, §4, Herodotus' Reliability). This idea of novelty might at first seem paradoxical when he is recording past traditions and past histories (e.g., the past history of

Sparta, 1.65–68), and when many of his stories have the archaic ring of the folktale (the story of Polykrates' ring [3.40–42], the story of Solon's visit to Croesus [1.29–33], the rise and fall of Croesus in Book 1). But in many ways Herodotus' *Histories* show his immersion not only in the traditions of his times but also in the most exciting intellectual developments of the latter part of the fifth century. His inquiry was a significant part of the shared milieu in that period that included early medical investigations and speculation, philosophical experiments, sophistic arguments, and creative speculation of all kinds. His methods of inquiry and his own awareness of them reveal that he is very much a product of this intellectual climate. Today we expect historians to be aware of their methods and sources, but this practice only began in the latter part of the fifth century. It is visible in the texts of the early medical writers which were collected under the name of Hippocrates, and in the works of contemporary philosophers, and in general in this period, different methods of getting at the truth, with or without the help of visual evidence, were being investigated. Thucydides picked up Herodotus' methods and improved upon them, stating his methods in a more compressed and authoritative manner but with some of the same vocabulary (*Thucydides* 1.20–22). Had Herodotus not led the way, Thucydides' task would have been far harder.

§3.5. There are also links between different writers of the period in the treatment of certain topics. When Herodotus described in Book 4 the customs (*nomoi*) of the Scythians, an ethnic group which lived in what is now the Ukraine, he balanced this with an account of the geography of the area, which was remarkable for its many rivers. We know from the late-fifth-century essay "Airs, Waters, Places," attributed to the doctor Hippocrates, that Scythia was a focus of attention to those intent on linking climate and geography to the physical character of the human inhabitants: this link in turn determined their susceptibility to certain illnesses, particularly the Scythian "female disease." The Scythians turn up elsewhere in the Hippocratic corpus and seem to have been something of a cause célèbre as people whose physical constitution was extremely damp; the Libyans were the opposite, very hot and dry, and in Greek eyes, therefore, much healthier. Herodotus' work bears a fascinating and complex relationship to these ideas. He knows about these investigations and can employ the idea of environmental determinism himself (e.g., 1.142.1–2, 2.77, 9.122), but he does not borrow slavishly. On the contrary, he seems to criticize them implicitly, as when he stresses that the Scythians' nomadism was the really effective part of their strategy in resisting the Persians (4.46.2), or when he emphasizes that custom/law (*nomos*) is the governing principle in the character of a people (3.38). Here he tells of an experiment of the Persian King Darius, who asked a group of Greeks what it would take to persuade them to eat the bodies of their dead parents: they exclaimed that nothing could induce them to do such a thing. Darius then asked a group of Indians,^a who were cannibals, what they would take to burn their parents' dead bodies (as the Greeks did), and they were equally horrified by the very idea. Thus, from this demonstration, Herodotus concludes that the famous

Intro.3.5a Delos: Map Intro.1.

poet Pindar was right: “custom [*nomos*] is king of all” (3.38). Here custom is implicitly contrasted with nature and the environment. One of the primary interests of the various writers we call sophists was in the relation or opposition between nature and custom, *physis* and *nomos*. Medical writers linked geography and climate to health and constitution in a type of environmental determinism. So when Herodotus stresses the importance of *nomos* here, as he does also for an explanation of Spartan superior courage in a conversation between King Xerxes and the former Spartan king Demaratos (7.101–104), he is engaging in the same debate, and coming down on the side of *nomos* as the determining factor.

§3.6. Elsewhere he criticizes current theories with arguments and vocabulary which would have been thoroughly familiar to other contemporary intellectuals (whether we call them natural philosophers, sophists, or medical writers matters less here, since they overlap considerably in this period). For instance, he criticizes the Ionian writers who believed Egypt comprised only the Egyptian Delta: “If we think correctly about these things, then the Ionians do not think sensibly about Egypt; but if the opinion of the Ionians is correct, then I undertake to show that neither the Greeks nor the Ionians know how to count, who say that there are three parts to the earth, Europe, and Asia and Libya” (2.16: a deliberately inelegant but literal translation). His greatest tour de force in this vein is his long section about the different theories on the cause of the Nile River^a flood, knocked down one after the other in Herodotus’ most argumentative and polemical style (2.19–27). When Herodotus says in the first person, about the Macedonian^b kings, “Now that these are Greeks . . . as they themselves say, I can affirm of my own knowledge, and indeed, I will demonstrate this later on, that they are Greeks” (5.22), when he talks of having proof and evidence, he is using the flamboyant, polemical, and demonstrative style that was fashionable in the latter part of the fifth century, particularly in the display lecture for a live audience and the investigation into natural philosophy and medicine.

§3.7. Knowing about fashionable theories, however, does not necessarily mean that someone accepts them. To say that Herodotus shared some of the ideas and language of the medical writers and sophists is not to affirm that he necessarily accepted all their views, still less the more radical ideas associated with certain sophists. He says in his own person that he believes *nomos* (custom, law) to be crucial to human society (3.38), which distances him from the most subversive sophists, who championed “nature” as more important in human morality, but he seems happy to declare one or the other custom that he describes to be an excellent one. He singles out the Babylonian marriage market practice to be “the wisest custom” of the Babylonians^a (1.196). Sadly, it had fallen into disuse, he says, but they used to hold an auction in which the money offered by rich men to acquire the most beautiful women as wives was then redistributed as dowries to give to the less beautiful as a kind of compensation, so that everyone, rich and poor, beautiful and less beautiful, could thus find a mate. This is not the remark of someone who simply

Intro.3.6a Nile River: Map Intro.2, inset.
Intro.3.6b Macedon: Map Intro.1, locator.

Intro.3.7a Babylon: Map Intro.2.

accepts all human customs as equally good or worthy. He expresses disagreement with those who thought animal behavior could be used as a justification for human behavior: speaking of the Egyptian and Greek taboo against coupling in temples, he says that some said this was justifiable because animals did it, but “I do not agree with those who now defend their practice in this way” (2.64). It was a fashionable sophistic trick to defend the apparently indefensible on the grounds of animal behavior: such arguments and their often ridiculous implications are parodied by Aristophanes in *The Clouds* (1421–1431). Herodotus seems to know of such arguments, but he is firmly traditional: animal behavior is one thing, the world of humans another. He was part of the “Greek Enlightenment”^b in many ways, but remained distant from the most radical or revolutionary theories of the sophists.

§3.8. Above all, he believed that there was a truth that could be discovered, or at least he was keen to affirm that he was finding out the truth: the *Histories* are full of statements of fact and corrections by Herodotus both to false anecdotes and to accepted tradition. Moreover, while he shared the late-fifth-century emphasis on human activities in determining the course of events, he believed, like most Greeks, that oracles would come true, and that the divine might affect the human world. This perhaps deserves some emphasis. Greek states and Greek citizens consulted the oracles, above all the oracle at Delphi,^a about their future course of action, and if we believe the traditions, questions might be direct or roundabout, and the answers might range from an enigmatic riddle to the most straightforward directives about what deities to honor in order to achieve the desired result. Apollo at Delphi is portrayed repeatedly as foretelling the future (e.g., oracles for Argos and Miletus, 6.19, 6.77, 6.86), and it is striking that in Herodotus’ *Histories* the oracle may be misunderstood or misinterpreted by the human actors, but the oracle, mouthpiece of the god, does not itself lie (the priestess may be bribed to give a false oracle, as in 5.63 and 5.66, but that is another matter). It is the fault of men if they willfully or arrogantly interpret an oracle in such a way as to defeat their original hopes. Croesus, for example, interpreted the oracle “You shall destroy a great empire” to mean that he himself would be successful against the Persians, whereas it actually meant the opposite, as the god Apollo pointed out to him afterward: the destroyed empire would be his own (1.53, 1.91). While the gods do not feature as actors in the historical narrative of the *Histories*, as they do in Homer, Herodotus does affirm that “It is plain from many pieces of evidence that the hand of god is active in human affairs.” He makes this claim in his narrative of the last stages of the Persian Wars, and the final battle against the Persians at Mycale in Asia Minor. He states that “it is plain” if it is true that the rumor of the Greek victory at Plataea against the Persians managed to reach the Greek army fighting the Persians on the same day all the way across the Aegean at Mycale (9.100). There is a hint of caution here (note the careful expression), but we are left with the strong impression that the divine plan was indeed to encourage the Greeks fighting at Mycale, so that they would win the victory in Asia

Intro.3.7b “Greek Enlightenment” (here and later, in §5.9) is the term sometimes used to refer in shorthand to the upsurge in intellectual creativity and innovation in the second half of the fifth century associated with Periclean Athens, the emergence of the sophists,

Thucydides, Euripides, and Socrates, the period envisaged as background to Socrates’ discussions in most of Plato’s dialogues. See, e.g., F. Solmsen, *Intellectual Experiments of the Greek Enlightenment* (Princeton, 1975).

Intro.3.8a Delphi: Map Intro.1.

as well as the crucial final battle on the Greek mainland. The hand of “the god” (unnamed) is also seen in the terrible storm off Euboea which did so much to reduce the superiority of the Persian fleet so that it should equal the Greek one (8.13).

§3.9. Herodotus’ moral world is thus one which looks backward rather than forward and which often seems reminiscent of an older Greece. It is worth dwelling on this further. Modern readers are struck almost immediately in the *Histories* with the sense that men (and women) are punished by the gods, brought down, for excessively arrogant behavior or for the sins of their forefathers. The story of Croesus king of Lydia offers all of this, and its place as the main opening narrative suggests that Herodotus meant it to be emblematic in some way for the rest of the *Histories*. Croesus, the fabulously wealthy Lydian king, was anxious to show off his wealth and good fortune to Solon the Athenian, one of the many wise men who visited Croesus (1.29–34). Solon, however, was unimpressed, offering instead two examples of men of greater happiness: Tellus, who died bravely and received a public burial, and Cleobis and Biton, who died in their sleep after their strenuous efforts on behalf of their mother and the deity. From these examples he also draws the uncomfortable and paradoxical moral “Never call yourself happy until you are dead”: man’s life is buffeted constantly, and the gods are jealous; good fortune can change very suddenly (1.32). The gods seemed to punish Croesus for thinking himself the happiest of men, for Croesus continued in his high opinion of himself, misinterpreted in his arrogance the enigmatic oracle mentioned above which said “You shall destroy a great empire,” attacked the Persians, and lost everything. Not only had he brought this misfortune on himself by his own arrogance, but it turns out that he was also suffering for the misdeeds of Gyges, an ancestor five generations back (1.90–91). When he accused the god Apollo of misleading him with the oracle, Apollo replied that he had managed to delay Croesus’ fate for three years, but not even the gods could escape the fates.

§3.10. This awareness of the transience of human fortune and the jealous nature of the gods fits smoothly with the moral view of man’s place in the world that we see in earlier poetry and much of Athenian tragedy. It is very Greek, very traditional, and to some extent Herodotus may have absorbed and continued it from the traditions which he recorded and reused; by definition these would tend to encapsulate traditional lines of morality, and the idea that the gods would punish arrogance. Yet the placing of this story of Solon and Croesus, as I have said, suggests that Herodotus meant the moral to have emphasis for his *Histories* as well, and it may be significant that the warning figure is a highly respected Athenian. At the start of the *Histories*, just before he turns to Croesus, he says he will “describe equally the small and the great cities of men. For the cities which were formerly great have most of them become small; and such as are powerful in my time were formerly weak. I shall therefore tell equally of both, knowing that human happiness [*eudaimonia*] never continues long in one place” (1.5). The instability of human fortune, then, was to

be a central theme. It is this, followed by the Croesus tale, that persuades some scholars that Herodotus meant the warning to have force in his own day, and for the most powerful and most prosperous city of his time, the city of Athens. The virtue of Herodotus' narrative style and presentation is that he does not need to spell out a message: the implied moral lies there implicit in the text for anyone to see if they so wish, clothed in the garb of traditional and therefore unprovocative wisdom, and his exact intentions remain ambiguous.

§3.11. We should also consider here as an abiding force the motif of revenge and the dynamic of "tit for tat," more elaborately called "reciprocity," which readers will see in the often bewildering chains of explanations offered for actions and motives. This, too, seems to be an archaic or traditional motif and was probably embedded in the oral traditions of many cities as the explanation for an action or situation, with all the simplification that oral tradition brought to bear on complex historical forces. In a particularly complex example, the Spartans in the late sixth century help some Samian exiles to defeat the Samian tyrant because, we are told, the Samians had once helped them, the Spartans, in a struggle against the Messenians;^a but the Spartans themselves see their action as revenge because the Samians had once stolen a bowl which Sparta had sent to Croesus (3.47). The Corinthians are also willing to help, because they had been insulted by the Samians generations before in a manner which Herodotus then explains (3.48–49). This rather crude form of explanation seems also to be a powerful traditional motif in explaining the behavior of individuals, though it is by no means the only form of causation in the *Histories*. The expansion of the Persian Empire can equally be defended in terms of the need to maintain the dynamism of the ruling power (7.8–9). The opening of Book 7 offers a spectrum of different forms of causation and explanation for the Persian invasion alongside the traditional motifs of reciprocity and revenge.

4. Herodotus' Reliability

§4.1. How far can we believe Herodotus' account? Are the *Histories* reliable, or some sections more reliable than others? Is the love of a good story sometimes more attractive for Herodotus than the quest for the truth? Herodotus' reliability has often been questioned, and some even wonder whether he was committed to giving historically accurate information at all. Could a serious historian really believe some of the implausible tales he recorded?—for instance, that an important stage in the Ionian Revolt against Persian power was launched by "the slave with the tattooed head"? For Histiaios, stuck in Susa,^a sent a slave with a secret message tattooed onto his head and the hair grown over, to tell Aristagoras in Ionia that he should now revolt (5.35). Or that King Amasis of Egypt abandoned his alliance with Polykrates tyrant of Samos (late sixth century) because Polykrates was too fortunate and was therefore bound to meet a reversal? And then there is his curiosity about "marvels," exotic animals or

Intro.3.11a Messenia: Map Intro.1.
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humans at the edges of the known world, of which his giant “gold-digging ants” of India are among the most notorious (3.102–105: this did not prevent Alexander the Great from looking for them, however, when he was in the vicinity^b). And what about the Egyptian and Persian skulls neatly separated on the battlefield of Pelusium mentioned above (3.12), which enabled Herodotus to discover an interesting fact about skull thickness? The sometimes bewildering combination of serious political analysis and wondrous marvels has led to the nickname “father of history, father of lies.” A more extreme accusation has been made that he deliberately and quite consciously gave false information or even made it up. A few modern scholars suspect that he goes much further than relaying doubtful information, and that he consciously invented material, stories, and even the very statements he gives about how he got his information (for example, the Egyptian priests cited as his sources in Book 2).^c One or two have even doubted that he went to Egypt at all, despite his frequent remarks about what he saw there and though he repeatedly pressed upon the reader his own experiences, what he saw himself, as a reason for believing him. If we accept this skeptical view, our image of Herodotus the traveler and researcher would be left in total disarray. Yet, on the other hand, his integrity is also defended, sometimes vehemently. Occasionally he may be pulling the wool over his audience’s eyes, we might admit, but then there are counterarguments, too. Perhaps (some scholars suggest) he has simply got things wrong, been misled by his informants, or been taken in by exotic travelers’ tales; or perhaps he simply could not resist including some curious but questionable stories (the giant ant tale is said to be a Persian account).

§4.2. The disagreements and indeed the very controversy seem to hinge mainly on two questions: first, what do we think Herodotus meant to convey to his fifth-century audience, who may not have understood his statements in the way a modern reader might? And second, what was he in a position to hear, see, find out, and investigate in that period? For the first question, he clearly does indicate that he has carried out investigations himself, that he has traveled widely and questioned people, and it would seem most unlikely that he would have invented these practices completely when he was inventing the method of carrying out such research: the satire or parody of a genre is likely to be a comparatively late development within that genre, not an initial stage. For instance, early in Book 2, Herodotus gives a fascinating story about an experimental rearing of young babies organized by the Egyptian pharaoh Psammetichos in order to find out the first (natural) language, and the story he prefers is the one given him by the priests of Hephaistos at Memphis,^a though the Greeks have their own versions of the story, and he comments further on the learned Egyptian priests with whom he conversed (2.2–3). This sounds like an elaborate, perhaps slightly labored, effort to stress new and thorough, if somewhat eccentric, methods of inquiry. One strand of the debate has criticized the way Herodotus loosely gives a version of events or motives as “what is said” by the Athenians, or the Corinthians, or the Egyptian priests, and if taken absolutely literally, these references are sometimes

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Intro.4.1c Most particularly argued by D. Fehling, “Herodotus and His Sources,” in *Citation, Invention and Narrative Art* (Leeds, 1989; translated and revised from German original of 1971).

Intro.4.2a Memphis: Map Intro.2, inset.

puzzling or invite skepticism. However, not all the remarks about certain traditions need necessarily imply that he has gone to the most knowledgeable and direct source (which in itself would be unlikely for all cases). I would particularly emphasize phrases such as “the Athenians say,” “but the Persians say,” “the Corinthians say,” which recur throughout the *Histories*. Taken literally, these expressions might imply that Herodotus talked to “the Athenians,” or more likely, members of the Athenian elite, and that these were therefore his direct source, Herodotus giving us a tradition with mention of his source in an almost modern fashion. So some scholars interpret them. But it is almost invariably a piece of Athenian history that “the Athenians say,” or a Samian version that “Samians say,” all quite neat and logical. Should we take these literally? A more plausible interpretation^b is that Herodotus usually means no more than “This is the Athenian tradition” or “This is the general Athenian version of events,” “This version belongs to the Athenians,” thus that he is signaling the social memory, the collective memory, and his audience would know this quite well. We shall return to this when we look at oral tradition below.

§4.3. Turning to the second question, we should not judge his account purely against modern standards of accuracy. It is occasionally suggested that because he is simply wrong in modern scientific terms, he cannot have seen what he says he has seen. His account of the Labyrinth in Egypt (2.148), a great “wonder,” is hard to match up with the later description of Strabo and the foundations that are all that is left of this immense building—though a reconstruction is possible, and one might expect from its very name that casual observers like Herodotus might indeed find the grand plan hard to grasp.^a The measurements of the Euxine (Black) Sea are not strictly accurate, though he says he was on the north coast (4.81), and it is strange that he has remarkably little to say about the great temples of Thebes and Luxor^b in Egypt, which he says he visited (2.3, 2.54 or 2.55.1, 2.143, strongly implied). A more complex example, which tantalizes the modern reader into wondering what he really saw in Egypt, is the striking section where he claims that the Egyptians do everything the other way around to the rest of mankind: “The Egyptians themselves in their manners and customs seem to have reversed the ordinary practices of mankind. For instance, women attend market and are employed in trade, while men stay at home and do the weaving. Men in Egypt carry loads on their heads, women on their shoulders, women urinate standing up, men sitting down” and so on, and he continues in this vein for some time, moving gradually to a detailed account of the most remarkable of Egyptian practices like mummification (2.35–36, 2.37ff.). There are many theories about what Herodotus might have meant here which serve to defend or undermine his veracity. Despite all this, however—both antithesis and exoticism—he still believes that the Greeks learned a great deal from the Egyptians, including much Greek religious practice (he presents this as his own discovery), so they are hardly “opposite” in every respect. An even more notorious example is that of the flying snakes from Arabia,^c whose skeletons he claims to have seen himself lying

Intro.4.2b See N. Luraghi, “Local Knowledge in Herodotus’ *Histories*,” Chapter 7, in N. Luraghi, ed., *The Historian’s Craft in the Age of Herodotus* (Oxford, 2001), an excellent critique of Fehling, “Herodotus and His

Sources.”

Intro.4.3a See Alan Lloyd’s commentary, *Herodotus, Book II*, Vol. III, on 2.148 for details of reconstruction.

Intro.4.3b Luxor (Thebes): Map Intro.2, inset.

in great piles at Bouto,^d where they were killed by ibises as they entered Egypt (2.75–76). They have puzzled most commentators. What could he possibly have seen, if anything? (Guesses abound.) Yet he says he went to Bouto expressly to inquire about these snakes. Was he too credulous when being shown around by his Egyptian guides, or does some chain of stories and misunderstandings lie behind this that can only elude us now? He claims that his information about Egyptian history and much else comes from discussion with the Egyptian priests, but the accuracy of his accounts compared to modern knowledge of Egypt is quite patchy. His account of the process of mummification is astonishingly accurate, but could he really have talked to priests? Or to lower temple attendants he assumed were priests? Or did he simply talk to Greek intermediaries in Greek?^e

§4.4. We need some common sense here, and we should not lose sight of an appreciation of what Herodotus was trying to achieve that was new. Scientific history was not yet invented, indeed “history” itself was not yet a discipline, traveling was difficult, geographical knowledge still mingled with what we would call mythical space, permanent notekeeping was probably difficult. Anyone with extensive travel experience knows how topography, places, and details can get inextricably confused, even (or especially) with the help of the camera. A superficial acquaintance with local culture can, in a travel account or guidebook, take on the veneer of a more profound understanding of what is essentially an alien culture. Modern travel writers frequently take shortcuts, despite the ease of modern travel. Moreover, the observer is likely to see things through the filter of his or her own culture: certain features will be picked out, others left unobserved, yet others misinterpreted. Just on these grounds alone, it seems hardly surprising if Herodotus sometimes has curious views of a place or people when compared to the full archaeological evidence now available. It is quite possible that the “Egyptian priests” to whom he talked lacked an entirely accurate picture of their country’s history, and that the accounts attributed to them in the *Histories* might also represent an amalgam of Greek ideas of what the priests said and the priests’ traditions seen inevitably through a Hellenizing lens. Then again, certain of the priests’ traditions (as recounted by Herodotus) may in fact reflect developments in Egyptian temple culture of the fifth century.^a Perhaps Herodotus did not describe the fabulous temple of Karnak^b because he did not go there, or was not allowed in, or for some reason was only briefly in Thebes, or not at all (as above, he says he went there at 2.3; see also 2.143). Could he have lifted his famously odd description of the hippo, with its mane and tail “like a horse” (2.71), from his predecessor Hekataios, hoping that Hekataios had seen more of one than he had? Was this one of his shortcuts, and one that he did not realize would be detected because Hekataios had also taken a shortcut? Or were they both simply concocting the description from the very name *hippopotamos* (“river horse”)? It is hard indeed to believe he went to Babylon, simply because his description is bizarre and exaggerated; and indeed he never quite says he did, only that he will not

Intro.4.3d Bouto: Map Intro.2, inset.

Intro.4.3e See Appendix C, The Account of Egypt, §7, a discussion of Herodotus’ Egyptian sources, for his section on Egyptian history.

Intro.4.4a See, for instance, I. Moyer, “Herodotus and

an Egyptian Mirage,” *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 122 (2002), 70ff., for fifth-century Egyptian culture and Herodotus.

Intro.4.4b Karnak (Thebes): Map Intro.2, inset.

describe the yields of millet and sesame because no one would believe it unless they had been there themselves (1.193.4). And when he says, "The greatest wonder for me, after the city itself, I will now describe" (1.194.1), he is using an oddly oblique way of implying his own personal knowledge. So yes, Herodotus probably took a few shortcuts. But to go further and disbelieve all his claims to have seen what he says he saw, to deny all his assertions that he was trying to discover true accounts of the present or past, would certainly be extreme. Moreover, it would be surprising for someone to invent examples of conventions within a genre that did not yet exist, as I mentioned above: the parody of a genre is likely to be a relatively late development within that genre. The most interesting point is that he tried to describe foreign cultures, foreign monuments, and foreign mentalities at all, and that he did so with an open-mindedness which is astonishing.

§4.5. He was also contending with the frayed edges of the world as it was known to Greeks, the ends of Greek knowledge, where perhaps someone heard from someone else about the tribes or geography beyond the next horizon. What is striking, and would have been revolutionary in his day, was that he bothered to point out for his audience tales that he thought stretched credulity, and where his own knowledge gave out. In Book 2, he says he went down the Nile as far as Elephantine,^a at the First Cataract: "I went to Elephantine and saw for myself; after that I rely on hearsay (*akouē*)" (2.29.1). It seems a little unlikely that he had really traveled as far as Elephantine, for he had just mentioned an absurd account of the sources of the Nile north of Elephantine with two conical mountains called Croph and Moph and fathomless springs which flow one toward Egypt, the other to Ethiopia (2.28), and he says he thinks the scribe who told him this was "playing" (*paizein*, 2.28). Yet far later accounts may corroborate the names as truly Egyptian: was Herodotus amalgamating folktales and topography? Or one tale with another?^b Or his own experience with curious and not entirely compatible accounts from Egyptians? What is significant is that his curiosity did not stop even there, and he proceeded to add hearsay accounts of what lay beyond even Elephantine.

§4.6. We should also reckon with the extreme difficulty of fully appreciating an alien culture, as modern anthropologists are well aware. Outsiders' perceptions may be influenced, perhaps fatally, by their own preconceptions and theories, and the prejudices or assumptions of their own culture. Nor do local informants always give the most informed or most "official" account of local practices. Herodotus went to Egypt and Scythia with an array of Greek conceptions and expectations and to some extent he must have seen these cultures through Greek eyes: when he says that the Egyptians are quite the opposite in their customs to the rest of mankind, mankind seems primarily to be Greeks (2.35). The fascinating question that arises for the reader of Herodotus is how far he has combined common Greek perceptions, more educated Greek theories, and the awkward intrusion of the visual evidence, what he saw himself, that might correspond to neither of these. He made sense of the world in part in terms of the Greek division between Greeks and barbarians, but he transcended that dichotomy to such an extent that he could show noble barbarians and

Intro.4.5a Elephantine (modern Aswan): Map 2.2,
Egypt inset.

Intro.4.5b See Appendix C for a discussion of the quality

of Herodotus' account of Egypt. For more detailed information on that subject, see Lloyd's commentary, *Herodotus, Book II*.

praise barbarian customs. He could describe completely unfamiliar practices like the Scythian royal burials (4.71–73) or Egyptian mummification (2.86–90) in ways that correspond well to modern archaeological discoveries, and attribute much of Greek religious practice to Egyptian influence (e.g., 2.49–53). There were also models that were popular in Greek natural philosophy for understanding the world: the early Greek scientific division between the hot and the cold, the wet and the dry, seems to be there in his accounts of Scythia and Libya (note the large number of horned animals in Libya: Greek science held that horns grew best in hot and dry conditions). But which came first, the theoretical framework or the observation? Sometimes the theory. Some of his comments about the natural world seem bizarre now, but were taken seriously enough to deserve rebuttal by Aristotle (e.g., in *Generation of Animals* [755b6], he objects to Herodotus’ “silly account” at 2.93 of how fish reproduce). We may also bear in mind that Greek natural science had its own interest in the apparently extraordinary, the obviously marvelous, as elements which demanded new explanation and further investigation.

§4.7. Wonders merited an account, however, in their own right, too: remarkable tales often appear in Herodotus precisely because they are marvelous. Some stories set in India and Arabia sound more like tall travelers’ tales or, in the case of the spice harvesting of Arabia (3.107–112), exotic marketing tales. In any case Herodotus embraces the marvelous as a subject for his inquiry. On Egypt, he explains that he will describe it at great length because of the large number of remarkable things in the country, “and because of the fact that more monuments which are beyond description are to be found there than anywhere else. It is because of these that I will dwell on it at greater length” (2.35.1).

§4.8. Herodotus seems to have conceived of his task as covering the entire known world, mapping the vast expanses of the *oikoumenē*, the inhabited world, and mapping it in terms of what could be known and what could not, in terms of human activity and human inhabitants. He pointed out how far knowledge could reach, what was the furthest extent and the limit of human information. For instance, on the sources of the Nile he made a comparison with the Danube:^a “Now as this river flows through regions that are inhabited, its course is perfectly well known; but of the sources of the Nile no one can give any account since Libya, the country through which it passes, is desert and without inhabitants. As far as it was possible to get information, I have given a description of the river” (2.34). On the edges of the *oikoumenē*, in particular, travelers’ tales merged with myth: Hyperboreans—people living in the far north and mentioned by the poets—whose very existence Herodotus doubted (4.32–36), Libyans and the various inhabitants of the African desert which he charts going west (4.168–197), along with Lotus-eaters (4.177–178), dog-headed creatures, men without heads and therefore with eyes in their breasts (4.191) and people without names.

§4.9. His remarks about truth, falsehood, and probability are interesting here, for he notes quite emphatically for the reader what he considers unverifiable, and this serves to reinforce the information he gives elsewhere as correct. Thus “Ocean,” the great river surrounding the known land mentioned by the poets, “takes the

Intro.4.8a Danube (ancient Ister) River: Map Intro.1, locator.

matter into the realm of the invisible, which therefore admits of no refutation" (2.23, literal translation): thus one element of mythical and poetic geography is calmly set aside as beyond the possibility of proof! Other pieces of information about the edge of the world are hedged around with a careful marking of a train of informants, as with the travelers into the African interior who came across a crocodile-infested river flowing west to east, which must, Herodotus believes, be the Nile (2.32–33): he says that he got this account from the Cyrenaeans, who got it from Etearchos king of Ammon when he was at the oracle of Ammon^a who told them what he had heard from the Libyan Nasamonians, whose wilder young men had explored the desert. In one of two possible proofs that Libya was surrounded by sea except for the Suez isthmus, he mentions the Phoenicians who sailed around Africa from east to west at the Egyptian pharaoh's behest, and insisted that the sun appeared on their right, i.e., to the north (4.42–43). Because of this statement, Herodotus declares that he does not believe them, but he relates it all the same, and for us the statement indicates their veracity and Herodotus' denial illustrates a limit of his geometrical knowledge. He may not be able to resist a good story at times, but he will often express disbelief or say that he is not sure (2.123.1, "the less plausible version should, since it was given, be declared"; more disingenuously perhaps on the politically delicate subject of Argive Medism,^b 7.152.3, his method was to "repeat what was said"). There is a link here with his knowledge of current intellectual arguments mentioned above. He can express incredulity in modern, sophisticated language but have the best of both worlds in telling the story anyway. He mentions, for instance, the tale told by the "bald-headed men" who live beyond the Scythians: they say that the mountains beyond them, that is, in the far north, are inhabited by goat-footed men and beyond that, by men who sleep for six months of the year. Of the latter story, Herodotus says he thinks it "utterly incredible" (4.24–25). He can mention a story which amuses and fascinates while showing off his superior discernment in disbelieving it.

§4.10. It is remarkable that Herodotus does not simply follow the same vein of prejudice and simplification about various barbarian peoples that we see in other Greek writers of the time. He was influenced, like anyone, by the mentality of his age and culture, but he went far beyond that influence and often seems deliberately to puncture some prejudice about foreign peoples. As he says about Greek misunderstandings of the Egyptians, "the Greeks tell many silly stories without investigation and among them is the silly fable about Herakles" (in Egypt), which he proceeds to criticize on logical and rational grounds, since "the Greeks are utterly ignorant of the character and customs of the Egyptians" (2.45).

§4.11. But Egypt had fascinated Greeks for generations. Mentioned in Homer, it had become home to Greek traders and mercenaries who lived in Naucratis^a and Memphis, controlled settlements in the Delta, from as far back as the late seventh century. Egypt was a source of exotic luxuries, ancient wisdom, and influential styles of monumental art. These were barbarians whom Greeks could admire. Of the other Near Eastern empires, Herodotus had a skimpy knowledge, but the Persians were another matter. They had attacked or conquered Greeks and were regarded with far

Intro.4.9a Ammonion: Map Intro.2.

Intro.4.9b Medism: see n. Intro.2.3a.

Intro.4.11a Naucratis: Map Intro.2, inset.

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