

The Historian's Craft in the Age of Herodotus



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Herodotus and Oral History

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I

oral sources
or at least
John Herod

IT is generally agreed that Herodotus gathered most of his information from oral traditions. Even those who doubt this accept that he sought to represent his sources as oral, whether he was inventing them' or describing them as oral when in fact they were written: 'throughout the Histories Herodotus maintains the fiction that his work is an oral account, even where we know or surmise it to be based on written sources'.² Since it seems to me that a generalized view that Herodotus sought to misrepresent the nature of his sources raises more difficult problems than it solves,³ I propose to ignore such approaches, and confine myself to investigating the consequences of the generally accepted version of Herodotus' sources. One consequence of this consensus has been to direct research on Herodotus away from source criticism in general, and

[This paper was originally published in H. Sancisi-Weerdenburg and A. Kuhrt (eds.), *Achaemenid History*, ii. *The Greek Sources* (Leiden, 1987), 93-115, and is reprinted with kind permission of the Nederlands Instituut voor het Nabije Oosten. Additions to the original version are put in square brackets.] The first draft of section I of this paper was written for a seminar given by myself and Professor Arnaldo Momigliano in Oxford in Hilary Term 1977; it was later discussed with anthropologists and classical scholars on a number of occasions, before being presented at the Groningen workshop. As it represents the theoretical underpinning of my *Early Greece* (Brighton, 1980) (see briefly pp. 27-32=22-8 of the 2nd edn., 1993), it was perhaps time it was published. Section II was written in the light of the Groningen discussions. Thanks are due to my colleagues there, and to David Asheri and Heleen Sancisi-Weerdenburg, who made valuable comments on the paper in its later stages.

¹ D. Fehling, *Herodotus and his 'Sources': Citation, Invention and Narrative Art* (Leeds, 1989), esp. 152 ff.

² H. R. Immerwahr, *Form and Thought in Herodotus* (Cleveland, 1966), 6.

³ See n. 28.

towards questions centred on Herodotus as an author, his conception of history, his aims, and his literary techniques.⁴ Neglect of the general problems of Herodotus' sources was perhaps a virtue so long as the principles of *Quellenforschung*, suitable only to certain literary historians, were liable to be applied. But it appears somewhat odd in the present age, when the problems of oral history and the characteristics, general and individual, of oral traditions are so widely debated, among both contemporary local historians and various other groups for 'radical history',⁵ and even more among anthropologists. Not surprisingly, such historians and anthropologists have felt the need to evaluate the reliability of one of their main sources of information. For outsiders, until recently the difficulty has been that the insights gained were scattered in the specialist literature, and often not easily detachable from their precise context. But two works of synthesis have made much easier the task I want to approach in this paper, that of comparing Herodotus' treatment of Greek oral traditions with the characteristics of other oral traditions, in the hope of being able to clarify both the nature of Greek oral traditions and the contribution of Herodotus himself. Before confronting the problems of Herodotus' accounts of non-Greek cultures, it seems to me important first to establish principles in the less uncertain area of Greek tradition; but the second part of my paper attempts to show how my results are directly relevant to Herodotus' means of acquiring information on such cultures, by taking as an example his account of Persia.

The two modern works from which my investigation begins both stem from experience of African oral tradition, but it does not seem to me that this limitation has affected their relevance to early Greece; in fact one recompense for the extensive use I have made of them and their sources may be in confirming that their modes of approach are indeed more generally valid. The first and most

⁴ The neglect of oral history is well revealed by the (admittedly impressionistic) survey of Guy Lachenaud, 'Les études hérodoteennes de l'avant-guerre à nos jours', *Storia della storiografia*, 7 (1985), 6-27. I have found especially valuable in the present context Immerwahr, *Form and Thought in Herodotus* [n. 2]; Simon Pembroke, 'Women in Charge', *JWCI* 30 (1967), 1-35; François Hartog, *Le Miroir d'Hérodote* (Paris, 1980); Mabel L. Lang, *Herodotean Narrative and Discourse* (Cambridge, Mass., 1984). I have not seen J. A. S. Evans, 'Oral Tradition in Herodotus', *Canadian Oral History Association Journal*, 4 (1980); but there are some excellent brief remarks in his *Herodotus* (Boston, 1982), ch. 10.

⁵ A useful introduction to this is in Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past* (Oxford, 1978); see also David Henige, *Oral Historiography* (London, 1982).

problems of
oral history
illuminated
by recent
sources

obviously relevant of these works does itself claim to offer universal rules, although its author's experience as an oral historian was at that time limited to the Congo; this is Jan Vansina's *Oral Tradition*.⁶ It offers a highly theoretical account of the various types of oral tradition and the problems of writing history from them; perhaps it is a sufficient indication of both its strengths and its weaknesses to say that it bears much the same relationship to the actual problems of oral history as Paul Maas's *Textual Criticism* does to the problems of editing a real text. The second book may be compared with Pasquali's response to Maas: it is Ruth Finnegan's *Oral Literature in Africa* (1970), a critical survey of the characteristics and types of African oral literature in general, and the problems related to the understanding of this literature.⁷ It is perhaps important to the historian that both these books are empirical in their method, and based on the work of field anthropologists: they neither demand interpretation within nor offer obvious support for more abstract anthropological theories. Of course, as with most firmly based empirical studies, much of what they say leads to conclusions which may already seem obvious from study of the Greek evidence; but I hope that even the obvious and well-known facts of early Greek tradition will appear different in this wider context.

The last systematic attempt to confront this aspect of Herodotus with anthropology was W. Aly's *Volksmärchen, Sage und Novelle bei Herodot und seinen Zeitgenossen* (1921; repr. with appendix Göttingen, 1969). As is natural in a work of that date, Aly was primarily concerned with the methods and compilations of the folklorists; and many of his conclusions are so extreme that (despite Ludwig Huber's claims for its central position in modern Herodotus research)⁸ the work has in fact been generally rejected, or passed over as of specialist interest only: in Kurt von Fritz's *Griechische Geschichtsschreibung* (1967), for instance, it is referred to only in the notes and then only for folk motifs. Some of the conclusions of this paper in fact bear a considerable resemblance to ideas of Aly—for instance, his distinction between *historiē* and *logos* is related to the two types of tradition I have postulated; and he too laid emphasis

⁶ First published as *De la tradition orale* (Tervuren, 1961), English trans. Harmondsworth, 1965; I have used the Penguin edition of 1973, with important new observations in the preface.

⁷ See also her *Oral Poetry* (Cambridge, 1977).

⁸ In Aly (1969 reprint), 317–28.

on the artistic continuity between Herodotus' source material and his own methods.

With some obvious exceptions (notably Arnaldo Momigliano in his various papers), more recent writers on classical historiography have been less than sympathetic to oral tradition. Moses Finley takes a truly Thucydidean stance, both in the generalities of his *Early Greece* (1970; 2nd edn. 1981) and in his paper on 'Myth, Memory and History', where he states:

Wherever tradition can be studied among living people, the evidence is not only that it does not exist apart from a connection with a practice or a belief, but also that other kinds of memory, irrelevant memories, so to speak, are short-lived, going back to the third generation, to the grandfather's generation, and, with the rarest of exceptions, no further. That is true even of genealogies, unless they are recorded in writing.⁹

At this point Finley cites the problems Homeric heroes have in remembering beyond their grandfathers; it might be more relevant to cite real, not literary, examples such as Hecataeus' sixteen generations to a god, or Heropythus of Chios' fourteen ancestors,¹⁰ both of whom take us back into the tenth century.

Vansina's conclusions are rather different: talking of work since 1961, he says: 'The last decade has shown that oral traditions have been empirically very fruitful for all history since 1750 or 1800 . . . Trustworthy traditions earlier than 1750 are uncommon and almost entirely limited to states, at least in Africa.'¹¹ Thus the experience of anthropologists suggests a limit to oral tradition twice as long as Finley's. Undoubtedly too the emergent poleis of early Greece qualify as 'states' in Vansina's sense, and their traditions might therefore extend even further; but in fact it is clear that his suggested time-span of 150–200 years is well supported by the example of Herodotus. Herodotus' information reaches back in reasonable form from 450 BC to the mid seventh century, the colonization of Cyrene, the Cimmerian invasions, and the Corinthian tyranny. The period before 650 BC is virtually unknown, a realm of conjecture and isolated stories which do not in fact correspond well to the realities of the late Dark Age. The worlds of Homer and Hesiod, and (more surprisingly) the first age of western colonization are as shadowy to

⁹ 'Myth, Memory and History', in *The Use and Abuse of History* (London, 1975), 11–33 at 27.

¹⁰ For Hecataeus see below, p. 22; for Heropythus, H. T. Wade-Gery, *The Poet of the Iliad* (Cambridge, 1952), 8–9.

¹¹ Vansina (1973 edn.), xiv.

Vansina's
Oral Trad.

Finnegan's
Oral Lit.

Vansina
oral trad.
helpful over
150-200 yrs

so also
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from ca.
650 BC

Herodotus as they were to Thucydides, who had no conception of the existence of a Dark Age, and failed even to distinguish clearly the migrations of that period from the western colonization. The time-span of up to two centuries emerges from both modern and ancient evidence as an empirical fact, in sharp contrast to the theories both of those who attribute to oral cultures exceptional powers of recall and of those who imagine that primitive memories are as short as modern American ones. If we wish to seek a special explanation of this phenomenon in the Greek world apart from its general consonance with evidence from elsewhere, we should not invoke the introduction of the art of writing. This after all occurred about a hundred years before the date in question, and shows its influence on historiography only in the generation after Herodotus, with the use of local archives and dating systems. Herodotus is effectively unaware of such systems and of their usefulness for writing more general history, as demonstrated, for instance, in Thucydides' account of the colonization of Sicily.¹² The oral tradition of *logoi*, to which Herodotus claims to belong, does not present the types of information which writing could have helped to preserve. It is more plausible perhaps to suggest that the information span revealed by Herodotus reflects the development of the polis as an institution in the period from 750 BC to 650 BC; but that would require a whole other investigation. In classical scholarship this dividing-line is already referred to in the idea of a transition from *spatium mythicum* to *spatium historicum*; but these are concepts which possess more resonance than explanatory power.¹³

The fact that the Greek oral traditions on which Herodotus drew seem to operate within the same chronological limits as the traditions of other societies may already require some explanation in relation to the existence of a strong oral epic tradition in early Greece, which is certainly earlier in its origins than the late Dark Age. It might be thought that this should create special conditions which would make early Greece a special case. This question is I think linked to another general characteristic of the traditions recorded in Herodotus which also needs to be discussed: that is, that in many important respects Herodotus' information about the earlier part

¹² Below, p. 23.

¹³ See W. M. von Leyden, 'Spatium Historicum', *Durham University Journal*, 11 (1949-50), 89-104; partially reprinted in German translation in W. Marg (ed.), *Herodot* (Darmstadt, 1965), 169-81.

of his period is only quantitatively, not qualitatively, different from his information about the later part. It might be assumed that, as he approached his own day, his information would naturally get better; but though it gets more detailed, it is not really true to say that it gets better. Thus Herodotus had spent much of his youth on Samos only some sixty years after the death of Polycrates, and must have spoken to many who had known him; yet his account of the career of Polycrates is not intrinsically more or less historical than the story of Cypselus and Periander, at the limit of his knowledge.¹⁴ And many of the characteristics of earlier parts of his history recur in his narrative of, for instance, the Ionian revolt and even the Persian wars themselves.¹⁵

It is usually claimed that the basic explanation for the comparative homogeneity of Herodotus' narrative lies in his literary personality;¹⁶ this is partly true, though I shall argue later that his literary personality in turn is a product of the Greek oral tradition. But it is important to realize that such homogeneity is in itself a characteristic of oral traditions. As Vansina somewhat schematically presents it, oral tradition consists of a 'chain of testimonies', whose reliability is primarily affected, not by the length of the chain, but by the mode of transmission: 'with regard to reliability, there is no doubt that the method of transmission is of far greater importance than the length of time a tradition has lasted' (p. 53). And the same mode of transmission affects the character of a story in the same way, whether it has been preserved for fifty or one hundred and fifty years.

It is this emphasis on the method of transmission in Vansina and elsewhere which seems to me most interesting in its consequences for the study of early Greek history and of Herodotus. The phrase of course refers to two separate but related areas: first the literary and linguistic forms in which traditions may be preserved, and second the social setting in which that preservation takes place.

One theoretical distinction employed by Vansina (and presupposed by Ruth Finnegan in her discussion) concerns us only be-

¹⁴ This problem is not considered in B. M. Mitchell, 'Herodotus and Samos', *JHS* 95 (1975), 75-91. For an analysis of Herodotus' Samian information as three separate *logoi* see H. R. Immerwahr, 'The Samian Stories of Herodotus', *CJ* 52 (1957), 312-22.

¹⁵ For the Ionian revolt see O. Murray, 'The Ionian Revolt', *CAH* IV¹ (1988), 461-90.

¹⁶ This is the assumption behind most of the works cited in n. 4.

with archives mostly used Herod.

For H. info closer to his own is more detailed but not better.

homogeneity of H. literary char. but also generally char. of oral trad.

cause it clarifies certain absences in early Greece. It is obvious that the characteristics of verbally fixed traditions will be different from free traditions, where the exact wording varies from telling to telling; in the category of fixed texts Vansina includes poetry, other metrical texts, religious, legal, and other formulae, lists, genealogies, and so on. The Greeks possessed a form of linguistically fixed tradition in the heroic epic (though a tradition that was as much creative as repetitive); but this tradition was non-historical in the sense that for the early Greeks it was not located in time. The Homeric cycle concentrated on one generation with only oblique reference to its immediate forerunners and successors, and did not apparently locate them in a larger historical framework—in marked contrast, for instance, to Jewish tradition or most northern European heroic epic. The creators and preservers of this poetry seem indeed to have been unaware of their own chronological relationship with the age of heroes, except as a world earlier and wholly separated from their own 'age of iron'; it was not until the time of Hecataeus that such links began to be forged. There was no true historical epic in Greece, and no praise poetry concerned with the contemporary world or the immediate past of the type so common in Africa; the society which invented the *epinikion* for athletes had nothing similar for political figures before the fourth century.¹⁷ And, in contrast to the Romans, for instance, other formulaically fixed traditions in religious ritual or law were non-existent or unimportant. The loss of Hecataeus' *Genealogies* makes it difficult for us to judge how many people could equal his own tour de force, or how far any class in Greece shared the genealogical interests of cultures such as Israel and Rome.¹⁸ But there is little sign that Herodotus could draw on such information except in the special instance of kings (Sparta, 7. 204, 8. 131; Macedon, 8. 139, and the eastern monarchies).¹⁹ This comparative absence of genealogies is one of the characteristics of Greek tradition which is obviously re-

¹⁷ [The first part of this statement still seems true; but the discovery of new fragments of Simonides' poem on Plataea suggests that some form of 'praise poetry' did evolve in 5th-cent. Greece, at least in relation to the Persian wars. See the contribution of Ewen Bowie in this volume, and my discussion below, pp. 321-2.]

¹⁸ The widespread use by the Greeks of generation counting in order to measure time does not of course imply the existence of a genealogical interest.

¹⁹ On the eastern monarchies see below, p. 40. The second Spartan king list is of course a partial exception—how partial depends on whether one follows the manuscript text of Herodotus or emends it to reconcile it with Paus. 3. 7. 2.

levant to the question of aristocratic traditions. Of other lists, the few that survived in city archives (such as the Athenian archon list) and temple shrines (the Olympic victor list, the priestesses of Hera at Argos, or the shrine of Apollo Archagetas at Sicilian Naxos, from which I believe Thucydides' Sicilian foundation dates ultimately derive) all postdate the introduction of writing, and were anyway not widely disseminated until the generation after Herodotus.²⁰

Herodotus' oral tradition belongs firmly in the category of free not fixed texts: except for oracles and a very few references to poetry, it shows no sign of being constructed around memorized or fixed verbal formulae. There are a few possible examples of aetiological stories attached to proverbs (for instance, most explicitly 'Hippoclidides doesn't care', 6. 127-9); and the use of proverbial sayings as part of the narrative technique of Herodotus is rightly emphasized by Mabel Lang.²¹ But in general the traditions used by Herodotus do not seem to have included those based on the proverb or collection of sayings, although these are known to have existed.²² Here we might contrast, for instance, the oral traditions behind the Gospels.²³ The attention of Herodotus was perhaps focused away from such popular story types towards what he regarded as more authoritative traditions.

Both Vansina and Ruth Finnegan argued that it is useful to subdivide this category of free (i.e. essentially prose) texts only in so far as the society itself does so: to attempt to impose such distinctions as those between true and false stories, or between myth, legend, and historical narratives, is misleading, whether we want to investigate the reliability of oral traditions or their literary character. Our perception of the type of tradition can only impede understanding of the forces moulding it, which are the type to which it is held to belong by the society concerned, and the social purpose which its preservation and performance fulfil. Thus Vansina discusses all

²⁰ See D.H. *Thuc.* 5; I shall argue for the Naxian source of Thucydides' Sicilian dates in a forthcoming article 'Thucydides and Local History'.

²¹ *Herodotean Narrative and Discourse* [n. 4], 58-67.

²² The most striking as preserving directly historical information is the proverb 'the cavalry are away': *Suda* s.v. *χωρίς ἰππέως*, χ 444 Adler. The aphoristic tradition is of course well represented in Presocratic philosophy, and the existence of collections of aphorisms can be traced back as far as the legend of the Seven Wise Men. On oracle-based traditions see below, pp. 31-2.

²³ See especially the work of the form critics, notably H. Dibelius and R. Bultmann: a brief exposition in English is in R. Bultmann and K. Kundsinn, *Form Criticism* (Oxford, 1934), 39-63.

epic trad.
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(cf. 25
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Hecataeus forged
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His sources
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prose narratives under the general non-committal heading of 'tales', and treats them as basically subject to the same tendencies, while Ruth Finnegan points out that unless we know the context and spirit in which a story is told, we cannot know whether it functions in that society in ways analogous to our categories of myth, history, or legend. Many societies have no obvious distinction between various types of tale; others distinguish in some way between 'heavy' material (perhaps religious myth and quasi-historical accounts) and 'light' (narrative for entertainment). There are more complex distinctions, as that of the Dogon, between 'true', 'impossible true', and 'impossible false': the same story can be regarded as falling under different categories according to the occasion on which it is told. The Kimbundu classify stories as roughly fictions, didactic, and historical narratives: the last are state secrets transmitted through headmen and elders.²⁴ Clearly accounts which are considered particularly important to a society or a group within that society, regardless of whether they are true, are more likely to be preserved accurately. In other words the objective truth or falsehood of a tradition is of no importance in judging the accuracy of its transmission, compared with the particular category to which the story is believed to belong and such factors as the relationship between artistic principles, accuracy of preservation, the seriousness with which it is regarded, and the mode and purpose of its preservation.

What type of categories did the Greeks possess? Despite the learned discussion that has centred on the question of the move 'vom Mythos zum Logos' and the attempts made to distinguish these two concepts in early Greek thought,²⁵ it seems to me that the scepticism engendered by these comparative examples is still in place. Herodotus himself makes no explicit contrast between *logos*, *historiē*, and *mythos*; though the words clearly have different connotations for him, he was not aware of our problems. His own interest is centred on the activity of recording *logoi*, for the results of which the (new?) word *historiē*, implying a degree of system, is also appropriate. He uses the word *logos* to refer to the whole (1. 5,

²⁴ R. Finnegan, *Oral Literature in Africa* (Oxford, 1970), 363-4.

²⁵ From W. Nestle's book of this title (1940) to the modern discussion of the consequences of literacy in early Greece. Excellent remarks in F. Hampl, "Mythos"—"Sage"—"Märchen", in id., *Geschichte als kritische Wissenschaft*, ii. (Darmstadt, 1975), 1-50.

95, etc.) or larger or smaller parts of his work (2. 38; 5. 36), and to individual stories within it. It is hard to resist the conclusion that he would have described himself as a *logopoiotos*, like Hecataeus (2. 143; 5. 36, 125) and Aesop (2. 134). From these two examples it seems likely that the connotations of *logos* can cover both fiction and factual narrative. Nor is it easy to see any very clear distinction between Herodotus' use of *logos* and his use of other concepts. *Mythos* is used only twice, and in both cases designates *logoi* which Herodotus believes to be ridiculous as well as false (2. 23, 45); but this is a category which he usually seems to have ignored. It seems that the oral traditions which Herodotus reflects did not in fact make any rigid distinction between different accounts, whether of the gods, or historical events, or the world around them. This does not of course imply that Herodotus and his informants had no interest in the historical truth or falsehood of these accounts. Herodotus' own claims, the preface of Hecataeus' work, and the condemnation of Thucydides 1. 21 all make it clear that accuracy in representing the tradition and the question of its truth were both considered to be important characteristics relevant to the new activity of describing the past. But Herodotus' own selection of *logoi* can perhaps best be understood in relation to a distinction between serious and authoritative *logoi* and frivolous ones, rather than between true and false. Herodotus aims in the first instance to record what he believes to be important or interesting among the *logoi* of various societies, rather than *logoi* which he thinks to be true or which concern particular categories of event.

Perhaps the most obvious and fundamental characteristic of oral tradition is the importance of the group which preserves it. The old romantic belief in the accuracy or at least the symbolic significance of folk memory has been replaced by the realization that 'accurate transmission is more likely if a tradition is not public property but forms the esoteric knowledge of a special group' (Vansina, 31). Group memory is more accurate because it is more continuous and more cohesive than the general recollections of the past. Of course, in this context the question of accuracy must be distinguished from the question of truth. We are here only entitled to assert that the group memory ensures accuracy of transmission: it does not ensure truth, for a fiction or false story is just as capable of being transmitted accurately or inaccurately as a true story.

In contrast to many other societies, ancient and modern, the

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Greeks do not seem to have possessed a class of professional remembrancers: once again their interest in the past was scarcely more than average. The occasional evidence of professional keepers of records, like the Pythioi at Sparta, the Kerykes perhaps at Athens, or the hereditary Cretan *poinkastai* who presumably had possessed a similar function and privileges before the introduction of 'Phoenician' writing to the city records,²⁶ serves only to demonstrate how limited and random such potential sources of tradition must have been. Jacoby's refutation of Wilamowitz's account of the origins of Greek and Attic historiography must stand, and the *exegētai* will never regain their former prominence.²⁷

Herodotus recognises the presence of such a professional tradition when he meets it; and he also recognizes in the same context the difference just mentioned between accuracy of transmission and truth. The Egyptians 'who live in the cultivated parts practise *mnēmē* and are by far the *logiōtatoi* that I have put to the test' (2. 77). But such a tradition has limitations: for he is anxious to distinguish that part of his account which is corroborated by Greek informants or depends on his own observation from that part for which he has relied on the Egyptian priests alone (2. 99, 142); and the consequence of the arrival of Greeks in Egypt is that from this point 'we know all subsequent events accurately [*atrekeōs*]' (2. 154). The exact significance of this last assertion is not clear, but it refers to the fact that for the Saite period Herodotus could claim the agreement of Egyptian and Greek traditions, as well as his own *opsis* (2. 147).

This limitation to Herodotus' respect for *logioi andres* should not obscure the fact that in general his work is explicitly founded on the testimony of such men. And though they do not normally constitute a professional class, one of whose chief duties is the preservation of tradition, the narrative of Herodotus shows that in each case they are chosen by him because they seem likely to possess an authoritative version of the past.

It is characteristic of Herodotus, and fortunate for us, that he at least appears to represent each tradition separately: he does not seem to seek systematically to contaminate or to rationalize his sources. Instead, he gives one account from each place: when vari-

²⁶ L. H. Jeffery and A. Morpurgo-Davies, 'Ποινικαστῆς and ποινικᾶλειν: BM 1969 4-2, 1, a New Archaic Inscription from Crete', *Kadmos*, 9 (1970), 118-54; compare the remarks of Evans, *Herodotus* [n. 4], 149-50, on *mnamones* and *hiaromnamones*.

²⁷ *Atthis* (Oxford, 1949).

ants occur, they are normally derived from different localities. In this he approaches the ideal of the modern observer, who is expected to record each tradition separately. In principle we must assume that Herodotus wishes us to believe that each account is drawn from those whom he regards as *logioi andres*. The model is impeccable, however faulty the execution.²⁸

The group memory is not only longer-lasting than folk tradition; it is also likely to be more limited and more liable to bias, for it reflects the interests of the group rather than those of the society as a whole. It often seems to be thought that this question in Herodotus and for early Greek tradition in general can be answered fairly simply by describing Greek oral tradition as generically 'aristocratic'. Thus, for instance, Moses Finley asserts:

In my judgement for the post-heroic period well into the fifth century, the survival of the sort of tradition I have been discussing must be credited largely to the noble families in the various communities, including royal families where they existed, and, what amounts to the same thing in a special variation, to the priests of such shrines as Delphi, Eleusis, and Delos.²⁹

And other scholars are fond of asserting in detail that the weaknesses of Herodotus' account of particular episodes, e.g. Polycrates or Cleomenes, or Solon, are due to his reliance on an often undifferentiated 'aristocratic tradition'. It seems to me on the contrary that the analysis of the structure of Herodotus' *logoi* suggests strongly that, so far from his sources being as homogeneous as this account supposes, for different cities and different areas they have markedly different characteristics and interests. And more specifically it seems to me that the importance of an aristocratic tradition for the narrative of Herodotus has been much exaggerated: with the somewhat surprising exception of Athenian history, there are very few of the typical signs of an aristocratic or family tradition in Herodotus.

As Vansina says, 'every testimony and every tradition has a purpose and fulfils a function. It is because of this that they exist at all. For if a testimony had no purpose, and did not fulfil any function,

²⁸ To postulate deliberate and wholesale deception (with Fehling, *Herodotus and his Sources* [n. 1]), rather than faulty execution, requires an answer to the question, 'Who invented the model which Herodotus is thought to have abused?' It implies a proto-Herodotus before Herodotus.

²⁹ 'Myth, Memory and History' [n. 9], 27.

space evidence
of prof.
memorization
in Greece

By priests
need verification
by Greeks
(accuracy)

H. records
traditions
separately

H.
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of sources
in diff.
places
not generally
aristocratic

On
Fehling

it would be meaningless for anyone to pass it on, and no-one would pass it on' (77). It is the investigation of the purpose of the *logoi* in Herodotus which reveals the milieu or group within which each of them was preserved and repeated, and the purpose reveals itself in the process of selection and reorganization which the *logos* has undergone. In this discussion I would prefer to avoid using words which suggest deliberate intent to mislead or deceive; this may of course be present; but often the factors which have caused a particular tradition to take on a particular shape are not reasons of self-interest or conscious political distortions, but aesthetic or moral considerations. Words like bias, *Tendenz*, or prejudice have the wrong connotations; we need a more neutral word, covering both conscious and unconscious self-interested distortion and literary or aesthetic distortion, as they operate over time within a tradition. The word I would offer is 'deformation'.

Conscious political deformation of course exists. One of the best non-aristocratic examples is the tradition of the Greeks in Egypt. A balanced account of their presence would have drawn on two sources: the merchants at Naucratis, and the descendants of the Greek and Carian mercenaries; the continued presence of the latter is known from Herodotus himself (2. 61: Carians at the festival of Isis slashing their faces with knives, thus proving that they are foreigners and not Egyptians), from hellenistic evidence, and from archaeological finds of the Persian period.³⁰ But there is no sign that Herodotus met a mercenary, though he visited their deserted *stratopeda*: his information about their activities and their way of life is general and imprecise. His Greek sources for Egyptian history lay in Naucratis, and surely within a particular group in that town. Modern writers have commented on the peculiar nature of his account of Naucratis and the way it ignores the early history of the town. One passage seems to reveal why: Herodotus describes the largest temple, the Hellenion, and lists the nine city groups who control it. He continues, 'the shrine belongs to these people, and these cities are the ones who appoint the *prostatai tou emporiou*: and any other cities that lay a claim to do so claim falsely' (2. 178). The city groups thus excluded consist of the three largest and oldest trading communities in Naucratis, those of Aegina, Samos, and

³⁰ Simon Hornblower pointed out to me the significance of the Herodotus passage; other evidence in M. M. Austin, *Greece and Egypt in the Archaic Age* (PCPhS suppl. 2; Cambridge, 1970), 18-19; T. F. R. G. Braun, *CAH* iii/3 (Cambridge, 1982), 43-8.

Miletus, whose independent sanctuaries are shown by archaeological evidence to be earlier than the Hellenion and to antedate the reign of Amasis. The history of Naucratis as told by Herodotus has been shaped by the claim of one political group, that centred on the Hellenion, to control the city magistracy: it is not surprising that such a tradition records nothing before the reign of Amasis, when this group seems first to have achieved separate status in the town.³¹

This is a tradition of a merchant class with political pretensions; it is scarcely aristocratic in any normal sense, if what is meant by aristocratic tradition is the persistence within particular important families of a set of traditions concerning members of the family. We might (as Vansina and others do) prefer to call them family traditions; but with the proviso that any such tradition which survives to impose itself on a wider public is likely to come from an important family. Such aristocratic or family traditions have particular characteristics. They concern primarily one family and its exploits; their purpose is through the justification and repetition of these exploits to enhance the present standing of the group. Their deformation tends therefore towards political apologia and exaggeration through biography; and they are essentially rationalistic, for they lack any religious or moral purpose. Unlike Finley, I think with most anthropologists that it is in fact useful to distinguish such aristocratic family traditions from a type of tradition in many ways similar, royal family traditions. For royal traditions concern the status not just of a particular family, but of an institution and often of the people as a whole. The Macedonian royal tradition of the activities of Alexander during the Persian wars, and his claim not just to be philhellene but hellene in every respect, are perhaps so clearly represented in Herodotus because they concern not one family, but the Macedonian people as a whole.

The fact that the evidence for the existence of family tradition in Herodotus seems to be strongest in the case of democratic Athens may lead us to speculate on the special status of the Athenian aristocracy. The Alcmaeonid tradition in Herodotus is the obvious example, because we know of a number of episodes in which this version of events differed rightly or wrongly from that which seems to have been more generally current in Athens.³² Another example

³¹ See my *Early Greece* [p. 16 pref. note], 215-17 [=2nd edn. (1993), 228-31].

³² [See now Rosalind Thomas, *Oral Tradition and Written Record in Classical Athens* (Cambridge, 1989), ch. 5; but I remain unconvinced by her arguments that

Eg. sources uneven, merchant class account

H. of Naucratis

family traditions versus royal trad. (latter more concerned w/ institutions)

Alcmaeonid trad. in Athens

is perhaps the influence of Philaid tradition on the account of the career of Miltiades. And the importance of family tradition in Athens can be used to explain certain gaps in Herodotus' Athenian history. Thus the weakness of his account of the Pisistratid tyranny, in contrast to that found in Thucydides, the Aristotelian *Constitution of the Athenians*, and Plutarch, is no doubt partly due to the disappearance of a Pisistratid family tradition, and to the deliberate silence of their allies the Alcmaeonids on this aspect of the past. Similarly the flight of Themistocles and the disappearance from Athens of any family tradition related to him are perhaps responsible for the peculiar character of the tradition about him, from which he emerges as a culture hero of a particular type,³³ associated with many different popular rather than aristocratic traditions, the Trickster, well represented in most cultures and exemplified in Greek heroic myth by Odysseus.³⁴

If the importance of aristocratic tradition in Athens is clear, elsewhere it is less obvious. Spartan tradition, even in so far as it relates to the kings, seems to be unconnected with families, but rather to give an official polis view of the past which it would be easier to attribute to a group aware of the need for social cohesion. The presentation of the tradition about the Corinthian tyranny in Herodotus is so oblique that it would be difficult to draw any conclusions about its direct or ultimate sources; for though the story of Cypselus is a genuine orientalizing myth of the exposure of the hero, of the type analysed in G. Binder's *Die Aussetzung des Königskindes*,³⁵ it is very probable that Delphi is responsible for the main lines of this tradition. But at least again here there is no sign of family tradition being important.

Thus alongside family tradition, the Greek mainland seems to offer a type of political tradition which lacks any family orientation, but sees the past as a succession of demonstrations of the rightness of present cultural values, in which the individual is subordinate to the ethos of the polis; these traditions belong to a society where

an 'Alcmaeonid tradition' is not dominant in Herodotus' description of a number of key episodes in Athenian history.]

³³ A different type of tradition was available to Plutarch in his *Life of Themistocles*, drawing on local historians in Magnesia: D. Asheri, *Fra Ellenismo e Iranismo* (Bologna, 1983), 52-3.

³⁴ E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Zande Trickster* (Oxford, 1967); M. Detienne and J.-P. Vernant, *Les Ruses de l'intelligence* (Paris, 1974; English trans. 1978).

³⁵ Below, p. 38.

the hoplite class is dominant. Though this type of memory is in some respects the antithesis of family tradition, both share the characteristics of being fundamentally rationalist and political in their orientation, and showing comparatively little interest in the moral patterns of history or the relation between history and the religious world order.

It seems that many of the traditions of mainland Greece were preserved in a political milieu by certain families or classes. This type of tradition can be regarded as the origin of our western style of history, with its rationalism, its emphasis on action in politics and war, and its obsession with decision-making and human causation. But one of our problems with Herodotus as 'father of history' is that, though he uses such traditions, they do not seem to explain his conception of history: they provide only material, they are not central to the way he approaches his task. That is why we so often find ourselves dissatisfied with him, because we misunderstand his aims. The mainland political tradition is in fact more relevant to Thucydides than to Herodotus.

There is another group of mainland traditions, which appears closely related to the shrine of Delphi. These traditions can initially be recognized by their use of (and often dependence on) oracles, by their purpose in explaining monuments at Delphi, or their emphasis on Delphic intervention. The priests of Delphi were of course capable of 'political' deformation in so far as their shrine was involved in political affairs: only those oracles which turned out to be true may be permitted to be remembered, together with the explanations which validate them: we may expect some (but not too much) invention of oracles;³⁶ in particular, the priests had to explain the ambivalent attitude of the shrine towards Persia throughout the Persian wars, and the fact that Delphi was the only temple complex not burnt by the Persians—for Apollo 'has spoken all truth for the Persians':³⁷ naturally it was Apollo who intervened to drive the Persian invaders away from Delphi.

But beyond this the Delphic tradition is not so much political as moralizing and professional. Stories have heroes, figures of impor-

³⁶ J. Fontenrose, *The Delphic Oracle* (Berkeley, 1978), takes a sceptical view of all oracles which serve as a basis for moralizing historical narratives; but that is often to invert the relationship between fixed text (oracle) and flexible reality: it is the event which is 'quasi-historical', not the oracle.

³⁷ R. Meiggs and D. M. Lewis, *Greek Historical Inscriptions* (Oxford, 1969), no. 12.

Spartan - polis (rather than royal family) tradition

political - polis tradition - char - source

Delphic priest had.

moralizing rather than political

tance in the benefactions to the sanctuary like the kings of Lydia; they contain strong elements of folk-tale motifs, i.e. motifs suitable for use in different stories which (like the formulae of the Homeric bard) provide transitions between episodes, and which point to the skills of a group of professional or semi-professional storytellers. But more importantly, the Delphic tradition seeks to impart a moral dimension to the past. Events are presented in a framework in which the hero moves from prosperity to over-confidence, and finally to a divinely sanctioned reversal of fortune. There is normally no question of sin and retribution involved, unlike some views of the nature of contemporary Attic tragedy; if a crime or an act of *hybris* is committed in the course of the rise to fortune, it is not usually emphasized as the reason for the fall. That rests in the nature of human affairs; cities and empires will rise and fall according to the whims of the gods: in the words of Artabanus, 'You see how the god strikes with his thunderbolt the tall, and will not allow them to display themselves, while small beings do not vex him; you see how the lightning throws down always the greatest buildings and the finest trees' (7. 10). Prosperity causes the envy of the gods, regardless of the hero's moral status. Such an ethic is religious or moral, not aristocratic, and fits well with the priests of a shrine which proclaimed 'know yourself' and 'nothing too much'. It relates of course in certain respects to the hoplite political ethic revealed by traditions elsewhere (e.g. at Sparta), notably in its emphasis on the dangers of excellence; but in origin and in effect it is quite different.

The important fact about this moral and aesthetic patterning is that it does not seem to be confined to accounts derived from Delphi: the whole historical tradition of East Greece as recorded in Herodotus shows similar characteristics. It seems as if there was no political tradition of the mainland type in Ionia: there are no signs of political deformation in the interests of particular groups. Instead even recent history shows heavy use of folk-tale motifs, recurrent patterns, and deformation for moral ends. It is perhaps for this reason that the account of Polycrates is so unhistorical and has such similarities with the stories of the Cypselid age, despite its relative closeness to the lifetime of Herodotus. Similarly, we may contrast the biography of Histiaeus in the Ionian revolt (the only Greek example of a biography in Herodotus)³⁸ with the way

³⁸ See my *CAH* chapter 'The Ionian Revolt' [n. 15]. This *logos* has been strangely

that the great contemporary figures of the mainland, Clisthenes, Cleomenes, or Themistocles, are only dimly and fragmentarily perceived.

If I am right in detecting such a fundamental difference between East Greek and mainland traditions, we are led to speculate on the causes of this difference. It might be possible to claim that the Ionian cities were socially different, more homogeneous in respect of wealth, for instance. I doubt whether one factor often invoked is relevant, the alleged eastern influence on Ionian literary traditions; for such influences would certainly not seem confined to Ionia, and in fact appeared earlier and rather more strongly on the mainland, as can be seen, for instance, in the Cypselus legend or in the case of Hesiod; moreover, the notion of eastern influences obscures the very real differences apparent in the styles and themes of the various eastern traditions. Further (to anticipate), there are important differences between Herodotus' eastern stories and the Greek moralizing tradition which concerns us here. I would, however, suggest that the absence of political traditions might well be related to the destruction of political élites in the Persian period and the Ionian revolt.

But that is a negative point: on the positive side I suspect that Aly was right to claim, alongside the Homeric tradition, the existence of a tradition of prose storytelling in Ionia, absent from mainland Greece except Delphi.³⁹ For the moralizing concerns of so many Ionian *logoi* seem to be related to Herodotus' own conception of history and to his narrative techniques. The general pattern of his work indeed mirrors the pattern visible in many of the Delphic and East Greek traditions; it also uses many of the techniques of the professional storytellers. It is a moral story of Persian pride, symbolized in the arrogance of Xerxes and humbled by the Greeks: the gods punish those who pass beyond the limits of human propriety. The main story of the Persian wars abounds in devices like dreams, portents, forewarnings. Xerxes is deliberately drawn into the conflict by false dreams; the figure of the wise adviser disregarded (Demaratus, Artabanus) is central to the creation of suspense and

neglected in the discussion on the origins of Greek biography from H. Homyer, 'Zu den Anfängen der griechischen Biographie', *Philologus*, 106 (1962), 75-85, onwards.

³⁹ See esp. Aly, *Volksmärchen* [p. 18], 208 ff.

East Gk
accounts
diff. - not
political
but moralizing
& biographical

Ionian
trad. of
(prose)
storytelling

foreboding in such a type of storytelling where the pattern is already known.⁴⁰

This overall pattern to the story of the Persian wars is Herodotus' own creation. It does not derive from attitudes in mainland Greece to the meaning of the past; we can sometimes detect the tensions as the protagonists of the war, Corinth, Sparta, Athens, see it in narrower polis and political terms of city honour. This pattern did not, therefore, come to Herodotus from his material. But to one brought up in the traditions of storytelling in Ionia it was the obvious way to present the Great Event. It is in fact this moralizing East Greek tradition which created Herodotus as a historian, and which moulded his attitudes towards the patterns in history, the narrative techniques of his art, and the roles of creativity, accuracy, and invention. For we must recognize that ultimately truth in Herodotus is a question of aesthetics and morality, as much as of fact.

We may, if we wish, go further, and suggest that behind the preservation of the past in Ionia, and therefore behind the invention of history, there lies a moralizing tradition of storytelling such as we find in Delphi. Just as the Homeric epic is the creation of an oral tradition of professional Homeric bards revealed and transcended by the greatest of them all, and thereby preserved in writing only in its final stage (genius and the need to preserve it together destroying the oral tradition), so Herodotus too perhaps is the heir to a tradition of oral *logopoi*, storytellers, who transcended his forerunners by moulding into a unity the traditional tales of his art, and ensured its disappearance by collecting and writing them down in relation to a new and greater theme—the last and greatest of the *logopoi* by virtue of being a *logographos*. The parallel with Homer is merely a restatement of Herodotus' own perceptions; for Herodotus was well aware that in his *Histories* he was following the example of Homer, in recording a Great War and singing of a new generation of heroes.⁴¹ Truth is subordinate to this aim of history.

⁴⁰ H. Bischoff, *Der Warner bei Herodot* (diss. Marburg, 1932), partially reprinted in Marg (ed.) *Herodot* [n. 13], 302–19.

⁴¹ On Homer and Herodotus see esp. E. Norden, *Antike Kunstprosa*, 2nd edn. (Leipzig, 1909), 40; Jacoby, 'Herodotos', *RE* suppl ii (1913), 205–520 at 502–4; Aly, *Volksmärchen* [p. 18], 263–77; L. Huber, 'Herodots Homerverständnis', in *Symusia: Festgabe W. Schadevvaldt* (Pfullingen, 1965), 29–52.

II

Twenty years ago Arnaldo Momigliano considered the impact of the Persian empire on Jewish and Greek historical writing in a famous paper which also offers the best starting-point for a discussion of the sources available to Herodotus for his account of Persian history.⁴² Within the general framework of a heightened national self-consciousness among both Jews and Greeks as a result of their contacts with the Persian empire, he noted three main areas of possible eastern influence on Greek historiography: there were obvious signs of 'elements of Eastern and particularly Persian storytelling'; oriental or Graeco-oriental biographical tales (like those of Zopyrus and Democedes) might have affected the development of a Greek tradition of writing biographical accounts of politicians; finally, although Jewish historians were clearly influenced by Persian governmental practice in their use of documents, the possible extent and limitations of Greek use of such documents were still obscure. How far has the picture changed in the meantime, and in what directions is further research likely to prove fruitful?

The earlier analysis of Greek traditions will have made some points clear. First, the investigation should not start from the historical reliability of the traditions available to Herodotus, let alone from the truth or falsehood of single statements or episodes: these are secondary questions, which can only be considered after the types of tradition have been established. This is of course a fundamental principle of all forms of source criticism, not one peculiar to oral traditions, though it tends to be forgotten more often in the oral context. Second, on the model proposed above, we should think especially in terms of the preservation of tradition and of channels of information: what types of *logoi andres* were available and recognizable to the more or less conscientious Greek enquirer?

I begin with a negative proposition: it is important to remember what was not available to or not used by Herodotus. There is no sign

⁴² 'Fattori orientali della storiografia ebraica post-esilica e della storiografia greca' (1965), now in id., *Terzo contributo* (Rome, 1966), 807–18; English translation in *Essays in Ancient and Modern Historiography* (Oxford, 1977), 25–35. See also Pierre Briant, 'Sources grecques et histoire achéménide', in id., *Rois, tributs et paysans* (Paris, 1982), 491–506, and Heleen Sancisi-Weerdenburg, 'The Fifth Oriental Monarchy and Hellenocentrism', in Sancisi-Weerdenburg and Kuhrt (eds.), *Achaemenid History* [p. 16 pref. note], ii. 117–31.

II.
Persian
sources

(à la
Nagy?)

that Herodotus had access to a priestly tradition, oral or written. It is not possible to analyse the Persian *logoi* in the way that has become accepted for his account of Egypt;⁴³ Herodotus' lack of understanding of Persian religion and superficial account of the Magi are enough to demonstrate that he had no direct contact with a Persian priestly class who may well have possessed an oral tradition of some interest.⁴⁴ One type of tradition is thus ruled out for Persia as for Mesopotamia.

The question of Mesopotamian traditions raises a wider question about Herodotus' contacts: the most important groups of *logioi andres* in the Near East belonged essentially to a literate culture, some at least of whose main literary forms are known to us through written records. One of the most obvious characteristics of Herodotus' accounts of eastern societies is that they show no sign of any influence from the known literary or historical genres preserved in writing, such as royal inscriptions, priestly chronicles, law codes, or sacred texts: in this he contrasts very strongly with the Jewish historical tradition both before and after the exile. This suggests, not only that Herodotus' historical methods and literary techniques are independent of eastern written traditions, but also that he did not even have extensive access to the guardians of those traditions as oral witnesses; for their modes of thought would surely have been marked by the influence of their status and their skills as a literate caste. Herodotus' accounts of eastern events are not patterned in the same way as his account of Egyptian history, by the influence (however mediated) of a priesthood whose skills as storytellers reflect their activities as guardians of a written tradition.

We must admit one significant exception. There is no doubt that documentary models lie behind three of the most famous Persian passages in Herodotus, the satrapy list (3. 89-97), the description of the Persian royal road (5. 52-3), and the Persian army and navy lists (7. 61-98). That is not, of course, to say that these passages

⁴³ See most systematically A. B. Lloyd, *Herodotus Book II*, esp. *Introduction* (Leiden, 1975).

⁴⁴ See most explicitly the claim of Strabo about the Magi, 15. 3. 18. If such a tradition existed, it could of course have influenced indirectly Herodotus' *logoi*: for this possibility see esp. P. R. Helm, 'Herodotus' *Medikos Logos* and Median History', *Iran*, 19 (1981), 85-90. I am not, however, clear, when Helm talks of 'Iranian popular saga' and 'independent heroic sagas' as a source for Median and Persian history, whether he is seeking to revive the theory of A. Christensen of the existence of fixed texts in the form of heroic poetry, or whether he is merely postulating free prose tales.

rest on documents: the notion of an army list left behind in the Persian camp after the battle of (say) Plataea is even less plausible than the theory that Herodotus lifted this or that entire passage from Hecataeus of Miletus. These are not documents either in our modern sense or even in the contemporary Jewish sense. They are lists created under the influence of documentary models. Literacy, as Jack Goody has demonstrated, encourages certain mental forms, the most common of which, the table and the list, belong especially to bureaucratic practices.⁴⁵ In the case of the two main passages of Herodotus, the problems involved in detailed analysis of the information, and the uncertainty about a possible date or function for the alleged underlying 'documents', suggest that we should emphasize the aspects of orality and written model. But however that may be, clearly involved in their transmission or their creation is a documentary mentality which is not usual to Herodotus. It is this phenomenon of documentary orality which attracts me to the hypothesis of David Lewis, that one source for Herodotus' information on Persia was the Greek element in the Persian imperial bureaucracy.⁴⁶ Belonging to at least the fringes of a highly specialized literate culture, in their organization of material they would naturally follow the scribal mental forms of the table and the list: asked for information, they would reply, not with a *logos*, but with an ordered 'documentary form'. To consider Momigliano's comparison, this is one step short of the Jewish historian's practice of actually quoting 'documents', since in that case the historian himself takes on elements from the scribal culture, but it can involve much the same potential danger of misleading us by suggesting the existence of an independent document behind what is in fact a form more or less consciously created or manipulated by the historian; yet both traditions rest on an acceptance of scribal practice and the scribal mentality. The attractions of this hypothesis as a way

⁴⁵ *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* (Cambridge, 1977), esp. chs. 4 and 5. O. K. Armayor, 'Herodotus' Catalogues of the Persian Empire in the Light of the Monuments and the Greek Literary Tradition', *TAPhA* 108 (1978), 1-9, criticizes the passages as if they were documents, and inevitably finds them unsatisfactory; better Briant, 'Sources grecques et histoire achéménide' [n. 42], 495-500.

⁴⁶ See 'Persians in Herodotus', in M. H. Jameson (ed.), *The Greek Historians: Literature and History. Papers presented to A. E. Raubitschek* (Saratoga, 1985), 101-17, and D. M. Lewis, 'The King's Dinner (Polyaenus IV 3. 32)', in Sancisi-Weerdenburg and Kuhrt (eds.), *Achaemenid History* [p. 16, pref. note], ii. 79-87; also M. A. Dandamayev, 'Herodotus' Information on Persia and the Latest Discoveries of Cuneiform Texts', *Storia della storiografia*, 7 (1985), 92-9.

no priestly
trad

no contact
w/ written
sources

(some
exceptions:
satrapy list
etc.)

Greeks in
Persian bureau
as source?

forward are obvious: it enables us to relate our two main bodies of evidence, the Persian documentary archives, both those surviving at Persepolis and those to be supposed elsewhere, and the Greek literary tradition; and it postulates a type of tradition which is likely to possess a relatively high level of detailed factual accuracy.

This hypothesis serves to highlight a quite different type of patterning in Herodotus' Persian account, which, if it is related to less reliable types of information, is nevertheless more dominant. The main Persian narrative of Herodotus is organized in two great blocks. The first gives a description of the fall of the Median empire and the rise of Cyrus, centred on the figure of Harpagus the Mede (1. 73-4, 95-130). The account uses a number of stories of different origins, most notably the narrative of the birth and upbringing of Cyrus, which is a Mesopotamian foundation legend going back to Sumerian times, adapted to become part of the official Achaemenid dynastic myth.⁴⁷ But despite its use of disparate elements, the narrative possesses a unity and a number of recurrent explanatory motifs (such as the eating of human flesh (1. 73, 119),⁴⁸ which suggest a single non-Greek reworking of more varied traditions; and, given the Median slant to the story, it is likely enough that its basic form represents a Median aristocratic version of events. The further theory that it came to Herodotus from the family tradition of Harpagus himself is less likely, given the way he is characterized (if only in a speech) at the end of the story, as 'at once the silliest and the most unjust of men: the silliest, if when it was in his power to put the crown on his own head . . . he had placed it on the head of another; the most unjust, if on account of that supper he had brought slavery on the Medes' (1. 129).⁴⁹

⁴⁷ We are fortunate in knowing something about both myth and ritual: see A. Alföldi, 'Königsweihe und Männerbund bei den Achämeniden', *Schweizerisches Archiv für Volkskunde*, 47 (1951), 11-16; G. Binder, *Die Aussetzung des Königskindes* (Meisenheim a. G., 1964), with my review, *CR*, NS 17 (1967), 329-32. R. Drews, 'Sargon, Cyrus and Mesopotamian Folk History', *JNES* 33 (1974), 387-93, has some interesting observations on the version of the Cyrus legend derived from Ctesias, which suggest that it is closer to the Sargon story, and therefore perhaps a 'Mesopotamian' version rather than a Persian one.

⁴⁸ Not in itself of course unknown to the Greeks, but treated by them rather differently; compare Thyestes. For this theme see W. Burkert, *Homo Necans* (Berlin, 1972), 108-25; M. Detienne, *Dionysos mis à mort* (Paris, 1977), ch. 3. In connection with p. 43, I note that the motif is transferred to Lydia by Xanthus, *FGH Hist* 765 F 18.

⁴⁹ The Median origin is generally accepted, e.g. J. M. Cook, *Cambridge History of Iran*, II (Cambridge, 1985), 203-4; the family tradition of Harpagus is an idea

The second great block of Persian narrative describes the episode of the Magian usurpation and the revolution by which Darius came to power, again from a distinctive viewpoint (3. 30, 61-88). The official version of these events was of course at least potentially widely available in the Persian empire, since Darius had ordered it to be circulated and published in the various languages of the empire (though it may be doubtful whether these would have included Greek).⁵⁰ But while Herodotus' account corresponds closely with this version, it is not derived from it: it is rather a telling or retelling of the alleged events from the point of view of the small group of Persian conspirators who included Darius not as a leader but merely as one of their number. Here the combination of a close relationship to the official royal version promulgated by Darius with the non-royal viewpoint makes it very likely that we are dealing with an account derived from oral tradition within one of the great families involved; and J. Wells long ago identified the most likely source for this, as for the account of the siege of Babylon (3. 153-60), in the family traditions of Zopyrus, great-grandson of the conspirator, who deserted to Athens in the lifetime of Herodotus.⁵¹

These generally accepted conclusions establish two blocks of historical narrative, one Median, the other more strictly Persian, which are perhaps as close as we are ever likely to get to what might be called a Persian historiography. It is worth therefore considering their characteristics and limitations.

In both cases the narrative is concerned with high politics and events that shaped world history; in both cases it is closely related to an official royal version of those events. But despite that relationship, in both cases we are offered not the official version itself, but a

that goes back to the 19th cent.: see the references in J. V. Prašek, 'Hekataios als Herodots Quelle zur Geschichte Vorderasiens', *Klio*, 4 (1904), 199-200. But 'there must have been some Greek reworking of the story. The H in Harpagus seems to refer to popular etymology and can only have been attached to the Iranian name Arbaka in Greek surroundings; cf. R. Schmitt, *ZDMG* 117 (1967), 133 n. 103; M. Mayrhofer, *Onomastica Persepolitana* (Vienna, 1973), 154' (letter from H. Sancisi-Weerdenburg).

⁵⁰ Behistun inscription col. 4 paras. 60-1 and 70 in R. G. Kent, *Old Persian*, 2nd edn. (New Haven, 1953), 131-2.

⁵¹ J. Wells, 'The Persian Friends of Herodotus', in id., *Studies in Herodotus* (Oxford, 1923), 95-111. I agree with Lewis, 'Postscript 1984', in A. R. Burn, *Persia and the Greeks* (London, 1962, 2nd edn. 1984), 105-6, that Zopyrus is not likely to have been a source both for this (often tendentious and unreliable) narrative and for the more 'documentary' elements discussed earlier.

Median
aristocratic
source

family trad-
Persian arist-
source

variant of it, related to the interests of a more or less precisely identifiable non-royal ruling group. Thus Herodotus had access, not to an official royal version of Persian history, but to variants of it current in the high aristocracy: paradoxically it was always easier for Greeks to make contact with the ruling classes in the Persian empire than with the imperial bureaucracy. Here, then, were men well qualified to stand among the normal types of Herodotus' *logioi andres*.

The accounts that these groups could offer fall short of being historical in important respects. First, they seem to be episodic, rather than continuous or biographical.⁵² We are not offered a coherent narrative or biography of any eastern king; rather Herodotus relates within a regnal framework a series of isolated but detailed stories. Second, the narrative itself and the elements of which it is composed seem to be fundamentally oral in form: it is patterned as a succession of stories independent of each other and often without obvious connections; the resonances and repetitions give the impression of being folk-tale motifs, traditionally accepted devices to explain motivation or actions. This is what we would expect from an aristocratic society which, for all its use of a literate bureaucracy, remained fundamentally illiterate.

Two points may make us hesitate. First, whence the regnal framework, which covers in formulaic phrases both the Median and the Persian royal houses: 'having reigned three and fifty years Deioces was at his death succeeded by his son Phraortes' (1. 102); 'Cyrus himself fell after reigning nine and twenty years' (1. 214)? But since this characteristic formula is also used by Herodotus in relation to Lydian and Egyptian kings, it is scarcely possible to claim it as a sign of the influence of Mesopotamian royal chronicle; it may be borrowed from these other cultures but it is anyway independent of the main Median-Persian narrative, with which it does not entirely fit.⁵³ Whatever its origin, it should not, I think, mislead us into claiming the existence of a continuous Persian account of each king, either biographical or in chronicle form.

The second question we may ask is whether it is fortuitous that both our blocks of narrative centre on a particular type of episode, the foundation of a dynasty, on origins and accessions. This at least

⁵² It is for this reason that I do not discuss the question of biography raised by Momigliano (above, p. 35).

⁵³ H. Strasburger, 'Herodots Zeitrechnung', in Marg (ed.), *Herodot* [n. 13], 688-736; cf. R. Drews, 'The Fall of Astyages and Herodotus' Chronology', *Historia*, 18 (1969), 1-11.

might seem a genuine Persian trait that has had a continuing impact on world literature from Xenophon's *Cyropaedia* onwards.⁵⁴ It looks as if the royal preoccupation with legitimacy and the validation of power had a significant effect in the process of selecting earlier Mesopotamian motifs and moulding the oral traditions of Persia, by providing a narrative framework which came to dominate them. Again this scarcely suggests that there existed any specifically Persian form of royal chronicle: the references that we have to such chronicles surely pertain to non-Persian records kept in one or more of the languages of the imperial bureaucracy, in 'the usual impersonal style of Eastern annalistic writing'.⁵⁵

By comparison with Greek and other oral traditions we can say that these Persian traditions are not as clearly aristocratic as one might expect, given that they were preserved in an aristocratic milieu. The account of Darius' accession, it is true, shows a typical interest in the rights and privileges of a particular group of families (3. 84); but in general the stories are marked by a recourse to the folk-tale motifs and repetitive use of stock situations that is more often thought characteristic of popular traditions. It should not perhaps surprise us if the Persian aristocracy is seen to submerge itself here as elsewhere in the existing cultural forms of the empire; but Karl Reinhardt was surely right to recognize differences between the general traditions of the Greek *logos* and eastern storytelling. These Persian stories lack the moral or religious dimension of their Greek counterparts; in Reinhardt's formulation, the Persian *Novelle* is a pure form, 'a story capable of being told as a unity with beginning and end, without regard to how perfectly or imperfectly it corresponds to an alleged "historical" reality which may lie behind it'.⁵⁶

In terms of content the Persian stories in Herodotus are also composed of typical elements, and deal in stock situations absent or rare in his Greek stories. They are court novels, of palace plots, of cruel punishments and even crueler vengeance, of faithful viziers and treachery, of harem intrigue and bedroom scenes, where women

⁵⁴ See Sancisi-Weerdenburg, 'The Fifth Oriental Monarchy and Hellenocentrism' [n. 42] and the references cited there.

⁵⁵ Momigliano, *Essays in Ancient and Modern Historiography* [n. 42], 28.

⁵⁶ 'Herodots Persergeschichten', in id., *Vermächtnis der Antike* (Göttingen, 1960), 133-74 at 138. Compare the remarks of S. Trenkner, *The Greek Novella in the Classical Period* (Cambridge, 1958), 24-5, on the moral seriousness of Herodotus' *Novellen* in contrast to those of other writers.

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have equal power with men to decide history. This is particularly obvious in the two blocks of narrative under discussion, where we see two great historical events of different nature, the rise of Persia and the usurpation of Darius, retold within the framework of the *Palastgeschichte*; in each case we know that these same events could be and were described differently, even within the Persian tradition—as instances of divine protection of the king and the triumph of righteousness. Instead the account of Cyrus' divinely ordained rise to power is transformed by being subordinated to a story of revenge and the faithless vizier; while the accession of Darius by the favour of Ahuramazda is played out in the bedchamber and the harem.

We should not ignore the importance of this interpretation of Persian history; it may derive many of its elements from popular sources; but, if it represents the considered response of the Persian aristocracy to their world, it can hardly fail to have reinforced the style of court life which it purported to describe. What is of course significant about this tradition is that it is identical with that which must lie behind the narratives of those later Greek historians who may be thought to have had direct knowledge of Persia, notably Ctesias and (to a lesser extent) Xenophon. It could well be argued that the history of Ctesias, with all its unsatisfactory elements, its lack of chronological framework and arbitrary reinterpretation of events 'breathing seraglio and eunuch perfumes, mixed with the foul stench of blood' (Eduard Meyer), is in fact a truly Persian history—not the invention of a Greek doctor, but an account of Persian court life as the Persian aristocracy saw it. The absence of a Persian history is after all a Persian failure, not a Greek one. But I am not yet proposing the rehabilitation of Ctesias as the leading exponent of a lost Persian historiography;⁵⁷ I am, however, happy to welcome studies that take seriously as oral tradition the oriental *Novelle* in both its Greek and its Jewish dress: it may not be reducible to our sort of history, but it is a genuine expression of Persian traditions about the past.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Such a rehabilitation is already under way among Iranists and Assyriologists: see F. W. König, *Ktesias (Archiv für Orientforschung, suppl. 18; Graz, 1972)*; W. Nagel, *Ninos und Semiramis* (Tübingen, 1982). But see Jacoby, 'Ktesias', *RE* xi/2 (1922), 2032–73; A. Momigliano, 'Tradizione e invenzione in Ctesia', in id., *Quarto contributo* (Rome, 1969), 181–212; R. Drews, *The Greek Accounts of Eastern History* (Washington, 1973), 103–16.

⁵⁸ H. W. A. Sancisi-Weerdenburg, *Yauna en Persai* (diss. Groningen, 1980).

It does not worry me, as it did not worry Reinhardt, that one of the most striking examples of the type of patterning that we have been interpreting is provided by the story of Gyges, king of Lydia, in its Herodotean version (1. 7–12). The Greek perception of Persia was derivative on the Greek perception of Lydia. It was Lydian culture and the Mermnad dynasty which gave the Greeks their model of an eastern society and of oriental despotism. Equally we know that there existed in Asia Minor of the fifth century a unified Lydian–Persian aristocratic culture, whose traditions must have fused together, allowing attitudes to Persian monarchy to be transferred to the Lydian monarchy. The Gyges story is in any event an exception within the Lydian *logos*: the various stories connected with Croesus are quite different in character and clearly Greek in origin. It was not until Xanthus of Lydia that Lydian history became fully assimilated to the Persian model.⁵⁹

More problematic is the difficulty referred to by Momigliano in his ironical remark, 'even a scholar with as fine an ear as K. Reinhardt was hardly able to distinguish between authentic Persian tales and tales attributed to the Persians by Greeks'.⁶⁰ It is of course true that the eastern court novel has sufficient similarities with story types in the Greek tradition for it to be easy for the Greeks to take over and even create court novels in their own style. It has always been hard to refute those who follow the simple way out of refusing to make generic distinctions and claiming that all story types are the same, just as it is hard to refute those who attribute nothing to Herodotus' power of observation and everything to his imagination. In replying to the sceptics we must proceed on various levels. First, we must try to delineate carefully the general characteristics which seem to differentiate stories told in an eastern context from those told in a Greek context in the spirit of Reinhardt. Second, we can point to detailed evidence which implies a basic Persian narrative; we are lucky that it is possible to demonstrate this for both our main Persian stories in Herodotus, in respect of general story line and also in many significant details which lie behind attempts at Greek rationalization; to take one example, the story of Darius' mare (3.

⁵⁹ This tendency is abundantly clear from the fragments of Xanthus, *FGrHist* 765; cf. n. 48 above. He also wrote *Magika* on Persia, F 31–2. For bibliography on the Lydian *logos* of Herodotus see C. Talamo, 'Erodoto e il regno di Lidia', *Storia della storiografia*, 7 (1985), 150–61 [and now the forthcoming English edition of D. Asheri's commentary on Herodotus book 1].

⁶⁰ *Alien Wisdom* (Cambridge, 1975), 131.

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84-7) attests a practice of horse divination non-existent in Greece, but still practised in Persia as late as the Sasanian period.⁶¹

Finally, we should be willing to admit cross-cultural influences. We have seen the fusion of Lydian and Persian kingship; orientalism⁶² is at least as old as the fifth century. By then, as Alföldi saw, the oriental monarch and the Greek tyrant had also fused in popular imagination,⁶³ and Reinhardt was happy to show how the Persian wars narrative of Herodotus itself combined elements of the Persian court novel with Greek storytelling to construct a plausible Persian version of events, which must surely rest on Herodotus' own historical imagination. But no one should be afraid of imagination in history.

⁶¹ Agathias 4. 25; references to modern discussions in M. A. Dandamayev, *Persien unter den ersten Achämeriden* (Wiesbaden, 1976), 166 n. 714.

⁶² E. W. Said, *Orientalism* (Harmondsworth, 1985), 56. This is of course a main theme of Momigliano, *Alien Wisdom* [n. 60], ch. 6.

⁶³ 'Gewaltherrscher und Theaterkönig', in K. Weitzmann (ed.), *Late Classical and Mediaeval Studies in Honor of A. M. Friend, Jr.* (Princeton, 1955), 15-55.

3

Ancestors of Historiography in Early Greek Elegiac and Iambic Poetry?

EWEN L. BOWIE

to be read with
Bowie 1986 (infra)

IN this paper I propose (I) to review briefly the traces of narrative early Greek elegiac and iambic poetry that might be seen as ancestors of historiography; (II) to assess how many of these traces might be securely or conjecturally claimed to be composed for sympotic, and how many for other, locations of performance; and (III) to ask to what extent any features of our earliest prose historiography might be argued to betray the influence of the techniques or performance conditions of such verse narrative. Section IV offers a very brief conclusion.

I

(a) One clear set of traces of narrative that deserves to count as historiographic is to be found in some longer elegies ascribed to poets composing between c.650 BC and the latter part of the fifth century. In the early 1980s¹ I argued that a number of poets recounted events in both the early and recent history of poleis—Tyrtæus, Mimnermus, and Semonides of Amorgos in the seventh century; Xenophanes at the end of the sixth; Panyassis early and Ion of Chios later in the fifth. I would first like to revisit the evidence and

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¹ 'Early Greek Elegy, Symposium and Public Festival', *JHS* 106 (1986), 13-35, the text of a paper that benefited from discussion by several audiences in the previous quinquennium. ←