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Herodotus and the Greco-Persian Wars

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WHY DO PEOPLE GO TO WAR? READERS OF HERODOTUS WHO SEEK TO UNCOVER THE CAUSE OF THE GRECO-PERSIAN WARS OFTEN FIND THEMselves baffled or confused, since he refuses to ascribe responsibility to any one factor or privilege one explanation over another. In this respect, he continues a tradition famously inaugurated by Homer, who takes an oblique stance on the cause of the Trojan War by commencing his *Iliad* in the tenth year of the conflict with the dispute between Achilles and Agamemnon. Writing after Herodotus, Thucydides also makes a particular war his subject but refrains from offering simple or uniform reasons; admittedly, he says that the power of Athens and the fear that it inspired in Sparta are responsible for the Peloponnesian War, but he arrives at this inference by way of an extraordinary introduction that encompasses factors as diverse as migration, piracy, and geology. For his part, Herodotus ostensibly singles out Croesus, the king of Lydia, as the first to undertake "criminal acts of aggression against the Greeks" (5; bk. 1, ch. 5), but the implication of the *Histories* and its many details is that no one person or thing can be held responsible for war and no one cause leads to it. If the origins of conflict cannot be reduced to a single person or thing or cause, that may be why so many individuals in Herodotus are unable to justify the need for war or account for its regularity.

Why, according to Herodotus, did Croesus go to war against the Persians? Croesus was the aggressor in a campaign against Cyrus, a campaign that ended with the sack of Sardis and the loss of Croesus's own empire. Croesus blamed a divinity for encouraging him to strike against Cyrus. The oracles had advised him that "if he made war on the Persians, he would destroy a great empire," but they neglected to divulge that the empire to be destroyed was his own and not the Persians' (23; bk. 1, ch. 53). Herodotus also suggests that other factors might explain Croesus's downfall, such as the divine anger that the Lydian king incurred for believing himself the most fortunate of all men or the retribution ordained for him by the gods because of a crime committed by his ancestor Gyges four generations

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earlier (6–8; bk. 1, chs. 8–13). Through defeat, Croesus came to know about the folly of war and said to Cyrus, "[N]o one is stupid enough to prefer war to peace: in peace, sons bury their fathers and in war fathers bury their sons" (40; bk. 1, ch. 87). And yet the *Histories* teems with rulers who give the clear impression of preferring war to peace.

Why, in turn, did Darius and Xerxes, the successors of Cyrus, go to war against the Greeks? Darius launched an expedition against the Athenians because they had aided the inhabitants of Ionia in their revolt against the Persians. Xerxes said that he wished to win glory, gain land, conquer all Europe, and also avenge the Athenians for their aggression against Persia and his father, Darius (406–08; bk. 7, ch. 8). But since the Persians enjoyed a style of living that was more plush and opulent than that of the Greeks, they stood to gain little, and despite the multiplicity of causes, at least one Greek expressed bewilderment at the logic of the Persian invasion.

> The story goes that when Pausanias saw all these things, fitted out with gold and silver and embroidered hangings, he told Mardonius' bakers and chefs to prepare the kind of meal they had made for Mardonius. They did so, and then, when he saw the gold and silver couches with their fine coverings, the gold and silver tables, and the magnificent feast, he was amazed at all the good things spread out there and, for a joke, he told his own servants to prepare a typical Laconian meal. When the food was ready, Pausanias was amused to see the huge difference between the two meals, and he sent for the Greek commanders. Once they were all there, he pointed to the two meals and said, "Men of Greece, my purpose in asking you all here is to show you just how stupid the Persian king is. Look at the way he lives, and then consider that he invaded our country to rob us of our meagre portions!" (574; bk. 9, ch. 82)

Pausanias was the Spartan general who in 379 BCE, at the battle of Plataea, led the Greeks to victory over the Persians and their commander, Mardonius. In this account of the battle's aftermath, Herodotus reminds his audience that the Persians enjoyed a level of refinement and luxury that appeared unimaginably excessive to the Greeks—especially, perhaps, to the Spartans—and yet the Persians persisted in attacking others and attempting to take over their lands. Why the "stupid" king, Xerxes, might wish to acquire even more land, and thus jeopardize his own nation, was beyond the reckoning of Pausanias and the other Greeks. It was true that Europe was said to have a natural charm that made it appealing to foreigners, and also true that Mardonius (the nephew, brother-in-law, and son-in-law of Xerxes's predecessor, Darius) had once remarked to Xerxes "that Europe was a particularly beautiful place, where every kind of cultivated tree grew and the soil was excellent; it was a place, he said, which no one but the king of Persia ought to own" (405; bk. 7, ch. 5). But Europe, even if it ought to belong to the king of Persia, seemed no more fertile or attractive than several other conquered territories, and some of the Greeks were puzzled by the Persians' desire to invade the poorer region.

When the rich conquer the poor, the civilized go to war against the uncivilized or the undercivilized. The Persians, for instance, went to war against the Massagetae, the Ethiopians, the Scythians, and the Greeks, in addition to highly "civilized" peoples such as the Babylonians, Egyptians, and Lydians. Herodotus saw wars against the "uncivilized" as unjust, and often he cast into his narrative a "wise adviser" whose role was to dissuade a ruler from launching an unwinnable war against those who were "primitive" or less "civilized." But the adviser's words were seldom heeded, and the wars were prosecuted nonetheless. For their part, the Persians said that they simply wished to extend their rule and domination over other peoples, whether rich or poor, civilized or uncivilized, advanced or primitive. That was Mardonius's

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point to Xerxes when the Persian court discussed the king's decision to wage war against the Greeks. "We conquered the Sacae, the Indians, the Ethiopians, the Assyrians, and plenty of other important races, and we now hold them in slavery. Why? Not because they did us any wrong, but just because we wanted to increase our dominion" (408; bk. 7, ch. 9). The Persians sought to invade the lands of the Greeks as well as the Sacae, the Indians, and the Ethiopians, although, as Herodotus's readers well know, their ventures did not invariably meet with success.

The desire for other people's land or greater dominion was not seen by other rulers—least of all by those whom the Persians attacked—as a well-founded reason for war, despite the righteous proclamations of Xerxes and Mardonius. Long before Plataea, Cyrus's son Cambyses had tried to deceive the Ethiopians by sending them gifts such as perfume and wine, but the king of the Ethiopians, though less "civilized," saw through the ruse and said that Cambyses's behavior was "reprehensible," for "[i]f he were a good man, he would not have wanted to possess any land other than his own, and he wouldn't have enslaved people who have done him no wrong" (177; bk. 3, ch. 21). Ultimately, the expedition Cambyses mounted against the Ethiopians failed; he underestimated the difficulties involved in making an attempt on so remote a country as Ethiopia, and he abandoned his plans at the point where his men resorted to cannibalism in order to sustain themselves on the arduous journey. The Ethiopian king was not the only sovereign to question the Persians' hunger for a vast empire. Tomyris, the queen of the Massagetae, rejected Cyrus's offer of marriage because she recognized it as a maneuver by which Cyrus hoped to gain her country. "Stop," she said to the king of Persia, "and rule your own people, and put up with the sight of me ruling mine. But no: you are hardly going to take this advice, since peace is the last thing you desire" (90; bk. 1, ch. 206). In the war that followed, Cyrus lost his life and suffered the ignominy of having his head thrust, by Tomyris, into a wineskin filled with human blood (93–94; bk. 1, ch. 214). Thus was quenched the bloodlust of Cyrus, but the Greco-Persian wars had not commenced at the time of his demise, and the narrator will recount tales of numerous violent clashes before he arrives at the end of his history.

If we turn to the beginning, we find that Herodotus begins his *Histories* not with an account of Cyrus or Croesus but, rather, with a proem in which he presents different stories to explain the cause of the conflict between the Greeks and non-Greeks. A series of displacements occurs in this proem as Persian and Phoenician versions jostle alongside each other to establish a true chronology of events and a satisfactory explanation for the Greco-Persian wars. Since the proem traffics in characters from Greek mythology, it has sometimes been read as a humorous prelude to the allegedly more serious narrative that follows, or as a rationalized story that is nonetheless implausible and incredible (and thus a warning to the audience about accepting any rational story). It is important, too, that travel, migration, trade, ethnic identity, the abduction of women (Io, Europa, Medea, Helen), and war (the Trojan War) appear in this proem, for these themes will recur in the bulk of the *Histories*, and Herodotus signals their importance for the narrative as a whole. Yet he also leaves behind the Persian and Phoenician discourses and marks a break with them when he says, "I am not going to come down in favour of this or that account of events, but I will talk about . . ." (5; bk. 1, ch. 5). What he proposes is that both the Persian and Phoenician versions are insufficient and that while mythology, colonization, gender, and economics are revealing as hermeneutic categories, they cannot complete analyses of war by themselves. Herodotus surely does not claim that his own account of the wars offers an exhaustive explanation for the causes of the

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conflict, and any reader who combs through the text in pursuit of a stable or coherent explanation, or set of explanations, for the Greco-Persian wars will be embarking on a fool's errand. The *Histories* offers an open network of connections that extends in so many directions that origins and consequences are frequently impossible to establish.

If Herodotus provides no single explanation for the cause of the Greco-Persian wars, he nevertheless opines, in his introductory sentence, that the "results of the enquiry" merit setting forth, and he states that his purpose is "to prevent the traces of human events from being erased by time, and to preserve the fame of the important and remarkable achievements produced by both Greeks and non-Greeks." Historical narratives, like wars, arise for complicated reasons. For Herodotus, war is generally not a phenomenon that admits of definitive explanations, nor is it explicable solely in terms of material causes, emotions, or ideology. But the difficulty of rendering a rational account of the cause of war does not lead the historian to abandon thought, description, narrative, and context. On the contrary: Herodotus barely touches on the conflict between the Greeks and Persians in the first four books of his *Histories*, and he takes the narrative of the great wars to Greece itself as late as the seventh book. To inquire into the events of the 490s and 480s BCE is to approach them patiently and seemingly at a tangent, and it is through these *longeurs* that the historian aims to comprehend the abundance of reasons for the hostilities between the Greeks and the non-Greeks.

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