APPENDIX 3

Knowledge and the Herodotean Narrator

The initial statement made by Herodotus at 1.5.3 on proceeding from "the first one I know (οἶδα) to have begun unjust deeds against the Greeks" strikes a confident posture. It is followed up quickly by another claim to knowledge: the Herodotean narrator "knows" (ἐπιστάμενος) that human happiness is ever on the move (1.5.4). Despite this assured beginning and its apparently strong truth claims, much of the discussion on epistemology and the *Histories* has focused on the absence of a rhetoric of truth. In what follows, I consider those instances in which the narrator makes self-referential claims to or disclaimers of knowledge and examine the extent to which these differ from truth claims.

The narrator assured of his knowledge reappears after the preface. Herodotus knows that the soils in Libya differ from those in Arabia and Syria (2.12.3) and that it is Egypt's border, if any, that separates Asia from Libya (2.17.1). He also claims knowledge of the *nomoi* observed by the Persians (1.131.1); this precise (ἀτρεκέως) information is contrasted with the unclear reports that he has received on the burials of Persian men (1.140.1–2).[1] In an assertion reliant on his deductions from a hypothetical experiment, Herodotus knows that all peoples would happily carry away their own evils if asked to exchange them with another people's (7.152.2).

Elsewhere, the desire for knowledge is a motivation toward historical inquiry, rather than a verification of its truthful outcome. Wishing to know if the stories he has heard in Memphis are true, Herodotus travels to have them corroborated in Thebes and Heliopolis (2.3.1). The same motivation prompts his inquiry into the reason for the Nile flooding in summer rather than winter and not giving rise to breezes (2.19.3). The decision to travel to Tyre is made "to know something certain" (σαφές τι εἰδέναι) about the god Heracles (2.44.1). There are also instances in which knowledge is disclaimed in the context of the fantastic, as in Herodotus'

[1] Cf. also 1.193.4, 2.122.2, 4.33.5–4.1, 5.22.1, 7.238.2, 9.43.1–2.

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announcement that he does not know that there is a river Ocean (2.23) or whether the Tin Islands exist (3.115.1).[2] He has no eyewitnesses, after all, to vouch for these.[3]

Native traditions play an important role in the acquisition of knowledge. This stands in contrast to the criteria necessary for truthful narrative, which hearsay seldom satisfies, as we saw in Chapter 6. Herodotus says "I know" (οἶδα ἐγώ) the story of the Lydians' burning of the temple of Athena Assessus because he heard it from the Delphians, whose oracle was consulted on the matter by the Lydian ruler, Alyattes (1.20); and "I know because I have heard in Dodona" (ὡς ἐγὼ ἐν Δωδώνῃ οἶδα ἀκούσας) that the Pelasgians used to call on the gods in prayer during their sacrifices (2.52.1); again, of the provenance of the story of the Persians controlling the water sources of the Chorasmians and their neighbors for additional revenue, "I know because I have heard it" (3.117.6: ἐγὼ οἶδα ἀκούσας). A more complex piece of knowledge is generated by a process of combining stories in Proconnesus and Metapontion in order to arrive at what Herodotus "knows" (οἶδα) happened in Metapontium 240 years after the second vanishing act of Aristeas (4.15.1). On another occasion, Herodotus is easily persuaded by his interlocutors that the man-made lake Moeris had its mounds of earth conveyed to the Nile, "because I knew by report" (ᾔδεα γὰρ λόγῳ) that something like this occurred in Nineveh (2.150.2). This principle applies to the historical actors as well, as when Gobyras counsels Darius that he "knew by report" (λόγῳ ἠπιστάμην) that the Scythians were hard to handle but had now *really* learned it (4.134.2: ἐξέμαθον). We might have expected a reversal of the verbs, with Gobyras learning by report and knowing by experience, but this is not what we find. Such passages tell against the position that Herodotus' knowledge claims depend exclusively on his own eyewitness testimony, important as this is. J. H. Lesher, for example, has found that "Herodotus held that knowledge, i.e. clear and certain awareness of truth, required confirmation on the basis of first-hand observation," a claim that is often repeated.[4] This is incompatible

[2] Cf. 4.46, 4.195, 7.26. At times, knowledge cannot be related, 1.51.4, 2.47.2, 2.123.3, 2.171.1, 4.43.7.

[3] 1.23: δὲ περὶ τοῦ Ὠκεανοῦ λέξας ἐς ἀφανὲς τὸν μῦθον ἀνενείκας οὐκ ἔχει ἔλεγχον. 3.115.2: τοῦτο δὲ οὐδενὸς αὐτόπτεω γενομένου δύναμαι ἀκοῦσαι, τοῦτο μελετῶν.

[4] Lesher (2010), 607. Starr (1968), 358, "Almost never does Herodotus proclaim anything outside the range of his own observation unmistakably true; more often it is *atrekes*, a term which means 'exact,' or 'precise' in the first instance."

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with Herodotus' willingness to affirm knowledge derived from oral testimony.[5]

Elsewhere, it is clear that knowing a *logos* and knowing its truth value do not necessarily overlap. Beyond the one that he will relate, Herodotus states that he "knows" (1.95.1: ἐπιστάμενος) three other variants for the life of Cyrus, which are not the true report (τὸν ἐόντα . . . λόγον). In short, sources are at times identified as purveyors of "knowledge," which is not to say that the Halicarnassian vouches for the veracity of each of these episodes. What is interpreted as knowledge can also be delusion. The Agiad brother of Leonidas, Doreius, "knew . . . well" (5.42.1: εὖ . . . ἠπίστατο) that he would become king due to his manliness, but the Spartans defer to tradition and appoint Cleomenes.[6] The misleading nature of Doreius' knowledge points to its only provisional overlap with truth. Yet the irony of the passage clearly depends on the association of knowledge with true belief.

Evidence for the only partially authoritative position of knowledge is confirmed by its connection to a higher standard, "exactness." To avoid the danger of remaining forever among the Persians, Democedes feigns ignorance of Greek medicine. When pressed, he confesses that he has familiarity with the art from his conversations with doctors but does not know it "precisely" (3.130.2: ἀτρεκέως). Herodotus speaks of the Hellenic knowledge of Egypt as "exact" (ἐπιστάμεθα ἀτρεκέως) after there is a Greek presence in Egypt (2.154.4). Likewise, the Egyptians support their exact knowledge of the age of the gods Heracles, Dionysus, and Pan by pointing to the written record they have always kept (2.145.3); interestingly, precision here depends not only on physical presence but also on writing. The distinction between knowing and exact knowledge is also seen in the Egyptian version of the Greek *nostoi* after the Trojan War. They certify their information about Menelaus and Helen because they know parts of the story by inquiry (ἱστορίῃσι ἔφασαν ἐπίστασθαι) and other parts "precisely" because they happened on their own soil (2.119.3: ἀτρεκέως ἐπιστάμενοι). The stress in these instances is not so much on sight as on presence more generally.

At the start of the *Histories*, Herodotus claims to "know" that Croesus first committed injustices against the Greeks and that man's well-being is

[5] As de Jong (2012), 132, rightly finds: "Eyewitness reports being (until Plato) the height of reliability in Greek storytelling about the past."

[6] The capacity for the verb to mean "false belief, mis-placed confidence" in this context is noted by Hornblower (2004), 110 n. 84.

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unstable. These declarations prepare the ground for an intrusive narrator, one whose presence in the remainder of the historical narrative will remain prominent. Knowledge can approximate a more rigorous standard alongside the language of precision, which often takes the form of direct observation or a close relation to it. It can also be produced through reliable hearsay, in a departure from Herodotus' practice elsewhere of depreciating *akoe*. Finally, knowing need not be synonymous with true belief. Due to these nuances in meaning and the importance of taking into account narrative context, interpreting what is at stake in "knowing" in the *Histories* must be done with care.

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