

# Herodotus: the father of history or the father of lies essay sample



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Herodotus was first thought of as the 'Father of History' by the Roman statesman Cicero, due to the fact that his book, called *The Histories* on the subject of the Persian Wars, is often considered the first of its style. However he is also referred as the 'Father of Lies', for many of the statements in his work are unfounded, unproved and have been shown to be false. It is thought that Herodotus began work on his histories in 443BC, he had however been travelling around Asia Minor and the Mediterranean, gathering information that would later prove useful when writing the history of his travels and the war.

The earlier sections of his work concentrate on the customs, traditions, history and legends of the peoples of the ancient world, such as the Lydians, Persians and Egyptians. It is likely that Herodotus actually did travel to many of the places where he describes, and his audience would have found the anecdotes and digressions of his work scintillating, delightful and insightful since they would have little or even no knowledge of these lands.

To his critics Herodotus was an unnecessary romantic whose work lacked serious analysis and commentary, and concentrated too much on the trivial and superficial stories in order that his work would be available to those other than an academic elite. Plutarch was one of the first serious historiographical commentators to raise question about the reliability of his work in his essay 'On the Malice of Herodotus'. Plutarch declares that Herodotus has committed the ultimate injustice by claiming to be something that he is not.

In Plutarch's beliefs, Herodotus is uneven in his flattery and does not give a balanced account of all his characters. He states that Herodotus 'uses only the harshest words and phrases when moderate ones would do', for example Histiaeus, despite being Greek is, chastised in Book 6 for being a coward, gullible, tyrannical and greedy for wanting to rule Miletus. Herodotus also has lavished praise onto those who are not Greek as with the Persian Megabazus, whom he describes as loyal to his master, shows admirable foresight and is a good military tactician.

Therefore it seems to Plutarch that the most serious crime that Herodotus has committed was to have been 'pro-barbarian', to Plutarch, it is not right that Herodotus should eulogise foreigners in such a manner. In ancient times, this xenophobic attitude would have been perfectly acceptable, and the Greeks would have considered themselves infinitely superior to anyone else. However from a modern perspective, this characteristic in Herodotus' work is considered enlightened.

It is thought that during Herodotus' lifetime, he managed to gain influence and success and earned enough money through readings and lectures on The Histories to support him in his later life. In the play Acharnians, The comic playwright Aristophanes satirises him, therefore showing that he was a scholar of some standing, and probably a household name. It is therefore impossible to believe that later historians, such as Thucydides were not familiar and influenced by his work.

Despite this, not once does Thucydides even mention Herodotus. However, he does at the beginning of his work make clear references to the fallacies

and mistakes of Herodotus. In his opening chapter for example he states that '... I have found it impossible, because of its remoteness in time, to really acquire a precise knowledge of the distant past or even the history preceding our own period'. When Thucydides writes, it is for the most part a study of the events as they unfold around him.

He makes it clear that it was difficult at times, for him to find information on these events despite the fact that he was living through them and nearly impossible to learn about events in the past. Since the events which Herodotus writes about take place some years before he puts them to paper this is a quite obvious attempt, on the behalf of Thucydides, to belittle the work of Herodotus and to make the audience think that what they have read cannot be taken seriously.

Again in Book 1, chapter 22, Thucydides says '... y history will seem less easy to read because of an absence of a romantic element. It will be enough for me however, if these words of mine are judged useful by those who want to understand clearly the events which have happened in the past... '. This appears to be another jibe at Herodotus, whose work contains a plethora of romantic elements, Thucydides makes out that his work is better and more accurate than that of Herodotus' because his is more serious and contains no romantic element. Dionysius of Halicarnassus was writing around 400 years after Herodotus.

He was interested in the beginnings of history and what determines a good historian. He stated that, although there had been a few local historians emerging around and before the time of Herodotus, they were insular in

comparison, and ' he chose not to write down the history of a single city or nation, but to put together many, varied events of Europe and Asia in a single comprehensive work. ' In a letter to his friend Gnaeus Pompeius Geminus, he makes a comparison between Herodotus and Thucydides, showing, according to ' the six rules of good history', how Herodotus was in fact the better historian.

Herodotus' subject matter was that of a glorious war where Greece was the clear victor. Dionysius also makes the case that Herodotus has known exactly what to include in his book, and what order to put it in, so that it is, informative and yet enjoyable at the same time. Herodotus' tone is always appropriate being neither harsh nor outspoken. Finally he points out that Herodotus' style is fine and measured throughout. With exception to the final point, Dionysius does not feel that Thucydides has in any way fulfilled these points.

The argument that Dionysius makes for Herodotus certainly seems convincing. However, it is important to remember that Dionysius is not entirely objective, as he comes from the home town of Herodotus and would therefore have felt an affinity with the Historian. Also, a close examination of Dionysius' letter to his friend reveals that his argument are entirely literary based and he does not appear to imply any importance to accuracy, research and impartiality, areas which Herodotus often comes under criticism for.

To the people of the 5th century, myth and legend were considered as much a part of their heritage and history as more recent events. Herodotus was

the first author to make clear distinctions between 'real history' and myth. In this period, the word *Historia* simply meant an enquiry, rather than an investigation into the past. Herodotus was conscious of the reliability of his sources and often cross-checked them with other sources. He regularly makes mention of the origin of his sources, for example, the priestess at the temple of Apollo at Delphi.

However in many cases, sources may have been scarce especially when referring to events that took place in the distant past as in Egypt. In book 2 chapter 123, he states that 'Anyone may believe these ... tales, which is to record the traditions of the various nations just as I heard them related to me'. This gives the impression that he regards some of the digressions that he recounts in his book, simply as stories, and that if you are credulous, as he makes out to be then you will believe.

Herodotus does indeed appear to tackle his history like a true historian, when it comes to sources. He has demonstrated his ability to research and inquire for his historical investigations. He interviewed witnesses, utilised first and second hand sources looked at documentary evidence, for example temple and oracle records, and travelled around the Mediterranean to embellish his cause. Herodotus managed to be a truly broad historian in terms of different cultures and societies.

He demonstrated this to a much greater extent than most other historians of antiquity, both Greek and Roman. His curiosity in other cultures, from a Greek perspective, was of interest to his audience, as they would have known little about lands outside their own. Herodotus knew that The

Histories would have been in an unfamiliar format to his audience and he was a stepping-stone between earlier fictional epics from great authors like Homer (The Odyssey, The Iliad) and later less literary authors like Thucydides.

Much of the style of the epic authors seems to have influenced Herodotus especially to the Iliad which would have been familiar to anyone with an education and it would have been flattering to Herodotus for people to say that his work was like a prose version of the work of Homer. Herodotus uses extensive characterisation in his histories, which parallels to Homer, and other epic literature. The characterisations make each person seem more real and brings them closer to the audience and we are able to relate to them more easily.

Characterisation does often lead to bias and the inevitability of making out some characters as more wicked or more slow witted than others. However, in most case Herodotus manages to avoid this, by presenting a balanced view of the characters, trying to point out bad points as well as good ones and vice versa. For example, In book 6, chapter 30, Darius is made out as a good delagator, and forgiving, and in book 5, chapter 124 he is said to be militarily formidable, " Darius succeeded all other generals". However in most other parts of the book he said to have been vengeful and tyrannical.

Other Homeric elements include his extensive categorisation and also genealogy, which also emphasises the oral tradition. In conclusion, it is difficult to perceive whether Herodotus was indeed the father of lies or the father of history. Clearly there are many example of where Herodotus lied or

stretched the truth: he could not have witnessed all speeches and therefore there may have been inaccuracies in his work. Critics like Plutarch had the belief that Herodotus was overly romantic in his writings and this hampered his ability to always tell a fully analytical history in a chronological and linear fashion.

We could view his omissions and inaccuracies as artist superfluities that enriched his work and made it an enjoyable, interesting and informative read. Clearly Herodotus' work was indeed groundbreaking and the first of its kind, his account of the Persian wars is the most complete and is regarded by academics throughout time as not only a great piece of literature, like Dionysius, but also as a reliable historian. Therefore it is my opinion that Herodotus is certainly the definitive father of History, which has elements of untruthfulness.