

The resonance of  
croesus' fall in  
kapuscinski's travels  
with herodotus essay  
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The fate of Croesus, according to Herodotus—as told by Ryszard Kapuscinski in his book, *Travels with Herodotus*—is to illustrate at least one historical maxim: “ human happiness never remains long in the same place.” This principle is reiterated in various ways throughout the book, which is based on the author’s career as a Polish foreign correspondent, as well as on his intimate knowledge of Herodotus’ *Histories* .

While still a young journalist, and in the wake of Stalin’s death and the subsequent thaw in political control within the Eastern Bloc nations, Kapuscinski goes abroad. He departs for India at the behest of his Warsaw editor, to accomplish—he hopes—“ the simple fact of *crossing the border* ” (Kapuscinski 9). As a *bon voyage* present, the editor presents him with a copy of Herodotus’ *Histories* , newly translated into Polish. Thus the wheel of his fortunes is set in motion—a pattern of events the key to whose interpretation and significance will be consistently, and uncannily, offered by the ancient Greek writer, whose text never leaves the author’s side.

So, to a large degree, *Travels with Herodotus* is book about a book—Herodotus’ *Histories* —and about the principles, rules, perceptions it enunciates. How Kapuscinski applies them to his own experience over a long and eventful journalistic career is unique. But by the end of the book this uniqueness takes on an opposite coloring: that of a venerable, impersonal and essential wisdom applicable to any period, or to any regional history, regardless of its actors’ distance from familiar cultural norms. In the episode of Croesus’ triumph and fall, Herodotus has King Solon of Athens state the matter as follows.

"...No two days bring events which are exactly the same. It follows, Croesus, that human life is entirely a matter of chance...Now, I can see that you are extremely rich and that you rule over large numbers of people, but I won't be in a position to [judge of your happiness] until I find out that you died well...Until [a man] is dead, you had better refrain from calling him happy, and just call him fortunate.

It is necessary to consider the end of anything... and to see how it will turn out, because the god often offers prosperity to men, but then destroys them utterly and completely ."(86)

Human happiness is unstable—indeed it may not be happiness at all, but merely temporary good fortune. Only subsequent events can determine to what degree a felicitous current of inscrutable destiny has deflected mischance and ruin. Until a man has reached the end of his life it cannot be said of him that his fate has been a happy one.

As it happens, Croesus is soon to discover that he has not been as happy as he has wished to believe, with his great piles of treasure and absolute power in Lydia. In the wake of an ill-advised war he is to become the slave and advisor to his enemy, the Persian King Cyrus. Moreover the triumphal happiness of Cyrus himself is to prove equally transitory, as he is brought low in yet a further example of historical irony: a losing, and altogether avoidable, war with the remote Massagetae: " an orgy of death and blood." (97)

The theme of fate's inscrutability in Kapuscinski's text is tied to another: the sheer magnitude of reality as encountered by limited human consciousness. <https://assignbuster.com/the-resonance-of-croesus-fall-in-kapuscinskis-travels-with-herodotus-essay-sample/>

While in India, where he is sent on his first foreign assignment, the author is stunned by the hugeness of the population and its cultural heritage.

In time I grew convinced of the depressing hopelessness of what I had undertaken, of the impossibility of knowing and understanding the country in which I found myself. India was so immense. How can one describe something that is—and so it seemed to me—without boundaries or end? (36)

Later, in China, he will begin to see that the incapacity to come to terms with vastness is not confined to his individual consciousness. Here the Great Wall, constructed with immense effort over thousands of years, offers a telling metaphor.

That is how the world's energy is wasted. In complete irrationality! Complete futility! For the Great Wall...is also proof of a kind of human weakness, of an aberration, of a horrifying mistake; it is evidence of a historical inability of people in this part of the planet to communicate, to confer and jointly determine how best to deploy enormous reserves of human energy and intellect. (58-59)

The world, it would seem, is too much for the human mind. The mind may even be too much for itself, particularly where memory is concerned. " Herodotus...felt that memory is something defective, fragile, impermanent—illusory, even." (75) Book-writing is the Greek historian's means of overcoming the defect in memory. And since the individual is the repository of memory, Herodotus traveled to find individuals, to tap their memories. In this way he resembles the foreign correspondent, Kapuscinski. Beyond this resemblance however, his ambition and confidence make of him " the first <https://assignbuster.com/the-resonance-of-croesus-fall-in-kapuscinskis-travels-with-herodotus-essay-sample/>

globalist.” (77) It is incumbent on such an individual to seek and find means to overcome, or at least manage, the fundamental limitations of human understanding.

One way of doing this is to identify laws, governing principles of reality. To return to the Croesus episode: Herodotus—according to Kapuscinski—locates the solution to questions of historical justice in a further question.

Herodotus tries to formulate his first law of history. ...Is it even possible to arrive at such a principle? Yes, Herodotus replied. That principle is the answer to the question “ *who...first undertook criminal acts of aggression .*” Having this question as to precedence in mind makes it easier to negotiate the tangled and intricate twists and turns of history, to explain to ourselves what forces and events set it in motion. (84)

In seeking to understand, by means of the Pythia, why his military campaign has come to grief, Croesus is told that his defeat has been brought about by fate in retribution for an obscure political crime committed “ generations ago” (89) by a distant ancestor. One can only surmise that the seeming irrationality of this answer was preferable, in the minds of all concerned—not excluding Herodotus—to the notion of a purely random development and outcome (i. e. the will of whatever god might be concerned in the case). We are told that Croesus accepts the verdict “ that the fault was his and not the god’s.” (89) Order and principle are upheld by historical events, and vice versa—in such a manner is the intellect preserved from destructive bewilderment, even where the desire for happiness has been thwarted and mocked by overwhelming misfortune.

As a globalist, Herodotus offers parallels with Kapuscinski's experience as an observer of world events. The journalist is present at the expulsion of the Belgians from the Congo region, at the fall of the Iranian Shah, at a change of regime in Algeria. Not only is human history like a wheel on which individual destinies are shaped by forces of ascent and descent—as in the paradigm presented in the story of Croesus and Cyrus—it is also like “ a great cauldron whose perpetually simmering surface sees incessant collisions of innumerable particles, each moving in their own orbits, along trajectories that intersect at an infinite number of points.” (214) History unfolds “ independently from yet parallel to other histories.” (214)

The more enormous the face of the world appears, the more emphatic the need to find principles to understand it. In the end it may be found that the satisfaction of the intellectual longing for order outweighs the drive to attain happiness through power and control. Croesus—who is satisfied by the oracle's pronouncement—outlives the power-driven barbarian, Cyrus. Kapuscinski, of insular Polish origin, survivor of the Stalinist era—and following the intellectual trail laid down by his predecessor-of-choice, Herodotus—does not seem dissatisfied with the discoveries about history his life and career have afforded him. The challenge is great after all: to confront not only the shattering developments of history, but the weakness of the unaided intellect in trying to unravel its meanings. Herodotus relied, quite literally, on hearsay. What lesson is to be drawn from this fact?

...however evolved our methods, we are never in the presence of

unmediated history, but of history recounted, presented, history as it

appeared to someone, as he or she believes it to have been. This has been  
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the nature of the enterprise always, and the folly may be to believe one can resist it.

This fact is perhaps Herodotus's greatest discovery. (272)

Objective truth is an illusion. What we may bring back with us from our researches is fragmentary, but it shines with the richness and variety of the world from which it originated. And if it is subjected to relevant inquiry, following intelligent precedents, we may be justified in sharing it with others as a form of "truth."

#### Works Cited

Kapuscinski, Ryszard. *Travels with Herodotus*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007.