

Compare and contrast the historical methods



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

“ Compare and contrast the historical methods, interests, and objectives of Herodotus and Thucydides”. He said you “ might consider the sort of writing(narrative, description, authorial analysis, interest in accuracy, etc.) and the author’s objectives in writing the history.”

Herodotus and Thucydides - the original fathers of Greek Historiography - are regarded as the first two historians.

Writing hundreds of years after Homer, Herodotus compiled his History (1) based on oral accounts and myth. A genial storyteller, Herodotus did not regard his writing as epic poetry. The History, which explores centuries of dramatic interaction between the ancient Greeks and the Persian Empire, culminating with the Persian Wars in the early fifth century BC, is a vast compilation of the history, customs and beliefs of the Greeks and “ barbarians”. Herodotus’ historical reliability depends on that of his predecessors, as his historical account is a composition that includes their notions of history, geography, natural history and anthropology, in a political and literary context.

A generation after Herodotus, Thucydides, who strove for objectivity, wrote about political and military events that occurred during his lifetime, with a close account of the war between Athens and Sparta in late fifth century BC. Thucydides’ history of The Peloponnesian War (2) is the composition of an astute political and military historian. In a disciplined and methodical style, his work analyzes issues related to the wars, with little digression into other areas.

Since fifth century BC, Western tradition of historical writing and inquiry developed beyond conventions established by Herodotus and Thucydides. In the twenty-five centuries that followed, many historians shared Thucydides' preference for contemporary history and local politics, others drew upon both original archetypes, and some rejected both methodologies. While in the course of developing modern objectivity historians contributed new theoretical ideas, they also continued "historical inquiry in the spirit of especially Herodotus, that is, the art of asking perhaps naive (if not objective) questions about human behavior in time." (3)

Similarities and differences between Herodotus' and Thucydides' histories have been the topic of much research and dissertation in classic scholarship analyzing their work on issues of historical truth and interpretation, history's relation to myth, the fascination with origins, the differences between chronicle and narrative history.

In order to compare and contrast the historical methods, interests, and objectives of Herodotus and Thucydides we must examine the characteristics of their literary method, including the narrative, description, authorial analysis, interest in accuracy, etc., and their historical inquiry – the authors' objectives in writing the history.

The context in which history is written is very important because the particular circumstances of time and place, which are reflected in the writer's message become part of the message, received and interpreted by the reader. "Thucydides, for example, was conspicuously and painfully the

product of a political ‘ crisis’ and his work cannot be extricated from his own intense and ultimately tragic experiences.” (4)

Herodotus’ and Thucydides’ innovative methods of conveying the experience of historical events and their interpretation have emerged in the context of traditionally vibrant ancient Greek culture. A range of literary allusions to myth and folklore, to earlier epic, to lyric and epigram, the pervasive influence of Homer found in the work of Herodotus, “ the broad lines of The History shaped like those of a Greek tragedy” (5), are explicitly relevant with regard to the historian’s connection with his cultural and literary milieu – “ for this History of mine has from the beginning sought out the supplementary to the main argument”. (6) Scholarly investigation of the Peloponnesian War has revealed plausible “ intertextual” connections between the dense text of Thucydides and the epic of his predecessors. (7) One relevant example of such connection is said to occur in structuring some of Thucydides’ plot-patterns, like the similarities between Nikias’ letter and Agamemnon’s speech, in Homer or that between the Athenians’ expedition to Sicily and Homer’s Odysseus’ return to Ithaca. (8) Another “ intertextual” connection has been noted in the similar choice of words and structuring of the accounts between Herodotus’ narrative of the Persian invasion of Greece and Thucydides’ narrative of the Sicilian expedition (9) One particular characteristic of Thucydides writing style is the pervasive interspersing of speeches within the body of his work. A very famous one is Pericles Funeral Oration, which became the model for many later speeches, and was very well known in antiquity.

A major distinction between Herodotus' and Thucydides' writings consists in their different assessment of what history is. Herodotus' concept of history, focusing on the diversity of the universal human experience, contains an expansive field of human inquiry that, later, became to be known as Cultural History. Thucydides, who presented history in context, focusing on political and military facts and events of his times, has been credited with writing the original "scientific" history. Herodotus and Thucydides employ different strategies in recounting the story of history. Herodotus narrates centuries of history within the mystery of cultures while Thucydides employs a reductionist and analytical strategy.

Herodotus' and Thucydides' works, which differ in many ways, also share many characteristics like the magnitude of their prose, the elusiveness with respect to meanings, the contribution to the understanding of ancient societies, their subject matter dealing with causes and course of war, their fascination with "origins", or their vision of "civilization" and "barbarians." Although Herodotus' eclectic manner of gathering information stands in contrast to Thucydides' problem-oriented style, they both regard telling the truth as mandatory to historical method.

When comparing Herodotus' method with that of Thucydides we notice that Herodotus appears throughout *The History* as an uncommitted Homeric observer, famously taking the risk of reporting hearsay as evidence, and occasionally crediting the gods with causes and outcomes of historical events. By contrast, Thucydides' historical method is based on precise, verifiable evidence and reflects a systematic understanding of the human and military politics. He devoted most of his adult life to the chronicles of the

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Peloponnesian War and sought all available evidence, in the form of written documents and eyewitness reports, to construct his account.

As Herodotus says, in his introduction to *The Histories*:

“ I, Herodotus of Halicarnassus, am here setting forth my history, that time may not draw the color from what man has brought into being, nor those great and wonderful deeds, manifested by both Greeks and barbarians, fail of their report, and, together with all this, the reason why they fought one another.” (10)

Thucydides, on the other hand, tells us:

“ Thucydides, an Athenian, wrote the history of the war between the Peloponnesians and the Athenians, beginning at the moment that it broke out and believing that it would be a great war, and more worthy of relation than any that had preceded it. This belief was not without its grounds. The preparations of both the combatants were in every department in the last state of perfection; and he could see the rest of the Hellenic race taking sides in the quarrel; those who delayed those who delayed doing so at once having it in contemplation. Indeed this was the greatest movement yet known in history, not only of the Hellenes, but of a large part of the barbarian world – I had almost said of mankind. For though the events of remote antiquity, and even those that more immediately precede the war, could not from lapse of time be clearly ascertained, yet the evidences which an inquiry carried as far back as was practicable leads me to trust, all point to the conclusion that there was nothing on a great scale, either in war or in other matters.”(11)

The difference between Herodotus' introduction and that of Thucydides is as remarkable as the difference in their method of historical inquiry.

Herodotus' method of inquiry consisted of relying on other peoples' testimony, customs and laws to speculate about the sincerity and motives of the sources upon which he compiled the accounts of his History. For example, Herodotus challenges Homer's assertion that the breaking of guest-friend taboo and the abduction of Helen were at the root of the Trojan conflict. But Herodotus does not completely reject Homer's story. He only calls into question Homer's story by invoking different versions of that story. But the speculations about the original story cast sufficient enough doubt to annihilate its merits, similarly to the way in which, throughout the Histories, seemingly small events cause colossal disasters.

For example, Book 2: 112 through 2: 121 corroborate how Herodotus gathered evidence to support Homer's story of the war at Troy – which in text is referred to under the name of Ilium. Herodotus tells us, “ I asked of the priests, they told me that what had happened to Helen, was this . . .” (12) “ This is how Helen came to Proteus, according to what the priests say. And I think Homer knew the tale; but inasmuch as it was not so suitable for epic poetry as the other, he used the latter and consciously abandoned the one here told.” (13)

Then Herodotus proceeds to explain his reasons for allowing the other evidence to prevail over that of Homer's account:

“ This, is the story the Egyptian priests told. I myself concur in what they have said of gave me of Helen. My reasoning is as follows: if Helen had been in Ilium she would have been given back to the Greeks whether Alexander

wanted it or not. For Priam was not so besotted, nor the rest of his kinsfolk, that they would be willing to risk their own bodies, children and city so that Alexander should be with Helen. If, indeed, that had been their sentiment at the first, surely later when many of the rest of the Trojans had perished in their encounters with the Greeks, and when, in Priam's own case, two or three of his sons on every occasion of battle – if we are to speak on the testimony of the epic poets – when all these matters of such consequence happened, I am confident that, if it had been Priam himself who was living with Helen, he would have given her back to the Greeks, if thereby he could have been quit of the troubles that were upon him. It was not even as if the kingship was going to devolve upon Alexander, so that, Priam now being old, things were at Alexander's disposal; for it was Hector, older than Alexander and more of a man, who would have taken over the kingdom on Priam's death; and Hector it would certainly not have suited to comply with his erring brother – and that, too, one who had caused great disasters to him personally and to all the rest of the Trojans. No, the Trojans did not have Helen to give back, and when they spoke the truth, the Greeks did not believe them; and the reason of this, if I may declare my opinion, was that the Divine was laying his plans that, as the Trojans perished in utter destruction, they might make this thing manifest to all the world: that for great wrongdoings great also are the punishments from the gods. That is what I think, and that is what I am saying here.” (14)

Contrary to Herodotus, Thucydides offers rational explanations as evidence for his claims and for the causes of later events that could be reasonably expected on the basis of that evidence. For example, Thucydides attempts to

justify the authoritative claim made in the introduction about the Peloponnesian war – that had just started – being more important than the wars before it – a real turning point in history. Thucydides investigates the Trojan War and the Persian wars for evidence that supports his views. His method of inquiry consists in rigorous investigation attempting to provide rational accounts through an innovative use of empirical data, simulating the methods used by Greek sciences of the time in the investigation of natural phenomena.

Thucydides rejects Herodotus' invocations of supernatural explanation when accounting for historical conflict. Instead, Thucydides uses a scientific, inductive method of inquiry to construct his theory of history. He considers the actual events, examines the constraints and options available to the protagonists, and then searches for possible consequences of the events in order to speculate about the causes of the initial event. His notions are always open to revision, without necessarily rejecting his previous explanations, but rather expanding his explanation in order to include this new information.

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