

Peacocks to Athens: Greek Cultural Reception of Persia in Herodotus' Depiction of India

Prior to the campaign of Alexander, Herodotus is our single best intact source on Greek knowledge of India (cf Karttunen 1989). He informs us that the 'Indoi' lived the farthest east of anyone "of whom something true is also said" (3.98). Given all the problems that have been raised with Herodotus' treatment of the foreign 'other' (Hartog 1980), his sources in general (Fehling 1989), and the perpetual problem of the giant ants (Karttunen 1989), it is remarkable that this assertion at 3.98 is in fact supported by an accurate reference to the Indian marsh crocodile, *Crocodylus palustris*, at 4.44. Therefore, the representation of India and Indians in the *Historiae* (in books 3, 4, 7 and 8) cannot be dismissed categorically as pure invention. An analysis of the Indian material as a whole can shed light on the extent to which, and the means through which, Herodotus (or any contemporary Greek) had access to knowledge about that part of the world. Furthermore, the manner in which the material is wrong, incomplete or distorted holds up a mirror not only to Herodotus, but also to the conveyance of people, trade and information across the entire distance of the Achaemenid Persian Empire. However, this material has seldom if ever been treated comprehensively.

This paper establishes that that though the journey between India and the eastern Mediterranean was extremely arduous (Conger 1952), trade connections were nevertheless possible through the intermediary of the Persian Empire (Fleming 1993, Briant 2002) and sufficient to convey to Athens not only Indian cotton, but a living peacock (Miller 2004). However, in the context of the known complexity of a large number of contemporary *mahajanapada* states (Thapar 2003), and Herodotus' more unified and thorough descriptions of countries like Egypt and Babylon, his Indian material is sparser, more simplified and occasionally self-contradictory.

Though Herodotus almost never attributes a source for his information on India, he seems to have drawn from three types. First, there were one or more military sources for the Persian army, which includes several special mentions of Indians. Indian warriors distinguish themselves at Plataia in book 8, and everywhere Indian dogs seem to be preferred by Persian nobles. Second, there is material from Darius' navigator Skylax of Karyandia (possibly through Hecataeus), which appears to have been drawn selectively for plausibility (unlike other portions of the *Historiae*). As presented, it is an admixture of true, distorted and absurd statements about India. Lastly, there are a number of Indian 'wonder stories' in the *Historiae* which seem to point not to Herodotean invention, but to the inner workings of the Persian Empire—from Persian nobles and bureaucrats to Greek expatriates whose presence is attested to by the Persepolis Fortification Archive (Lewis 1985), reminding us of the presence of personalities such as Themistokles and Kallias in the Persian court. The famous story of the ant-gold seems to represent an authentic tradition from India. Another anecdote (3.38) may preserve genuine Achaemenid royal propaganda that seems to have gone unnoticed as such. In sum, this material excludes the possibility that Herodotus invented freely, and suggests a more complicated process (sometimes unsuccessful) to learn and write about a topic outside his range of autopsy or direct inquiry.

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