

## Herodotus' Prologue and the Greek Poetic Tradition

From his opening declaration of intent to preserve the *kleos* of great and wondrous human deeds, Herodotus demonstrates that his prose account of the Persian Wars (and much else) is written in the wake of and in response to the Greek poetic tradition. In my talk I will consider the implications not only of the Homeric references that bracket Herodotus' prologue (from opening sentence through 1.5.4, as defined by Wecowski 2004), but also of the poetic rhetorical device used to structure the prologue as a whole, the priamel.

The long shadow cast by Homer is widely recognized in Herodotus' opening chapters, which begin and end with allusions to the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Herodotus' climactic mention in his opening sentence of the reason why the Greeks and non-Greeks fought one another evokes the proem of the *Iliad* (Nagy 1987), and invites a provocative comparison between the Persian and Trojan Wars: in the modern, revolutionary medium of prose (Goldhill 2002), Herodotus seeks to equate the military achievements of modern Greeks with those of primeval heroes long preserved in the poetic tradition. Moreover, in claiming as the starting-point of his own researches the Lydian king Croesus, whom he knows (οἶδα, 5.3) to have first wronged the Greeks, Herodotus appropriates the authority of the Homeric Muses, whose eye-witness knowledge of long-ago events contrasts with human ignorance (*Iliad* 2.485-86). Finally, Herodotus' claim to traverse human cities (ἄστυα ἀνθρώπων, 5.3) large and small alike alludes to the proem of the *Odyssey*, and Odysseus' having seen the ἄστυα of many men; Herodotus thus projects for himself a persona that not only suggests travels to the numerous, far-flung

destinations canvassed in the *Histories*, but also a penchant for story-telling that need not be (always) constrained by the truth (Marincola 2007).

In addition to these Homeric references, with their implications for the author's subject matter, intent, and persona, Herodotus articulates his search for the cause of the war and the proper starting-point of his narrative as an elaborate prose priamel (Race 1982). The priamel is a distinctive rhetorical structure, with numerous precedents and parallels in Greek poetry, that leads from an introductory "foil" (comprising two or more subjects or perspectives) by way of contrast and analogy to the "climax," a particular point of interest or importance. Thus while Persian *logioi* and Phoenician authorities trace the enmity between East and West to a series of ancient abductions (Io, Europa, Medea, and Helen) culminating in the Trojan War, Herodotus, by contrast and for his part (ἐγὼ δέ, 5.3), identifies Croesus as having initiated the series of international injustices that result in the Persian Wars. Herodotus' adaptation of this distinctive introductory stratagem serves several purposes: it introduces Croesus with extraordinary emphasis; it highlights the intrusive first-person narrator that sets Herodotean narrative technique apart from Homeric narrative technique; and, more broadly, it marks Herodotus' crucial departure from the popular perception of contemporary events as rooted in and inherently inferior to the glorious deeds of primeval heroes—deeds so far removed in time that they lie beyond the reach of Herodotean *historie*. Race (1982) describes the movement from "foil" to "climax" in the Pindaric priamel as often underscoring the significance of the *hic et nunc*; in Herodotus' deployment of the device at the beginning of the *Histories* this movement underscores a new approach to the study of the past, with important consequences for the development of Greek historiography.

Herodotus' prologue thus serves as a fitting introduction to a groundbreaking prose work that engages in an ongoing conversation with the Greek poetic tradition, to which it is both indebted and opposed.

*Works Cited*

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