

“What Truth Did He Utter?”: The Early Christian Reception of Herodotus

The reception of Herodotus both in classical antiquity and in the modern period has been relatively well-studied (Momigliano 1966 and 1990; Murray 1972; Olivieri 2004). However, the reception of Herodotus in one significant corpus of ancient literature, namely the early Christian authors, has yet to be examined in any systematic fashion. This presentation examines the use of Herodotus by Christian authors from Clement of Rome (late 1st century CE) to Augustine (early 5th century CE) in order to better understand the attitude of this small but important subset of the educated Greco-Roman world toward one of classical Greece's most important and widely-discussed authors.

The dozens of citations of Herodotus by early Christian authors can be broadly divided into two groups. The smaller group consists of critiques of Herodotus himself, often in the service of comparing his work unfavorably to the Jewish scriptures. The commentator Theophilus, for instance, notes (not entirely correctly) that Herodotus' history begins only at the time of Cyrus, while the records found in the Hebrew Bible stretch substantially further back. Clement of Alexandria, meanwhile, accuses Herodotus of plagiarizing from Sophocles' *Antigone*, while the prolific author Origen expresses incredulity at the historian's use of *interpretatio graeca*, especially with regards to the gods of the Scythians.

Yet despite such critiques, the majority of the references to Herodotus made by early Christian authors come in the form of simple citations intended not to criticize the historian but rather to bolster their own arguments via what can only be described as an appeal to his authority. The sheer number of these citations testifies to the breadth of knowledge commonly held by the ancient Christian authors about such secular works as Herodotus's *Histories*. Very often, the historian is quoted in order to make an argument about the antiquity of the Jewish (and

by extension, Christian) religion vis-a-vis the religion of the Greeks. For instance, the 2nd-century Christian author Athenagoras repeatedly quotes Book II of Herodotus in order to “prove” that the Greek gods were named and assigned their various functions only four hundred years before the time of Herodotus, during the lifetimes of Homer and Hesiod. Even more damning to Greek religion is Herodotus' assertion that the Greek gods are almost entirely derived from Egypt, especially since many of these latter gods can be shown (says Athenagoras) to have been mere mortals.

Apart from polemical citations such as these, the Christian authors often cite Herodotus simply in passing. During a discussion on dreams, Tertullian refers to Astyages' dream of the birth of Cyrus in order to show that dreams can indeed foretell the future. Theophilus makes mention of the same Astyages and his rocky relationship with Harpagus to demonstrate the woeful practices of the nations with regards to cannibalism. Meanwhile, Origen cites Herodotus' discussion of Persian sacrificial practices to rebut his opponent Celsus' argument that only barbarous nations like the Scythians (and, as Celsus says, the Jews) refuse to set up images to their gods.

Taken as a whole, the early Christian attitude toward Herodotus seems to be one of grudging respect. While early Christian authors occasionally compare his writings unfavorably to the historical writings found in the Bible, most citations of Herodotus demonstrate a willingness to rely on him as something of an expert, even if this willingness is based in the pragmatic fact that they are able to make use of him to suit their own ends. As the father of history, Herodotus' place in the literary pantheon could not be denied or ignored, and early Christian authors found it necessary and even beneficial to be familiar with his work so as to be ready to cite him whenever it was convenient.

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