

## BOOK REVIEW

*Reading Herodotus: A Guided Tour through the Wild Boars, Dancing Suitors, and Crazy Tyrants of The History.* By DEBRA HAMEL. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012. Pp. xxiii + 329. Hardcover, \$60.00/£29.45. ISBN 978-1-4214-0655-8. Paper, \$29.95/£15.50. ISBN 978-1-4214-0656-5.

Herodotus' famous volume can be bewildering indeed for lay (not to mention professional Classicist) readers, and Hamel sets out to provide "a 'good parts' version of *The History*, ... a loose retelling of Herodotus' account, with obscure references explained and the boring bits left out" (3). Hamel frankly admits the subjectivity of such a project, and that her own interests "tend to the scatological, sexual, and sophomoric" (4). Taking us from Croesus (Ch. 1) through to Plataea, Mycale, and Sestus (Ch. 13), the shape of the book follows closely that of the original, with just occasional divergences from the sequence of Herodotus' presentation. "Psammetichus and the Antiquity of Egypt," 2.2 (67–8), for example, is held back until the middle of the chapter dealing with the Egyptian *logos*; the Arion digression (1.23–4), with its brief mention of Periander, is saved up until the end (107–8) of a chapter that retells the stories of Polycrates and Periander (Herodotus Book 3). Herodotus' complicated Ionian revolt narrative is clearly and engagingly retold, with its connections to the later War well brought out. Ethnographic material receives shorter shrift than the historical narrative, but there is coverage of the more sensational, e.g. prostitution of the Lydians (33), or "Gilded Skulls and Merry-Go-Rounds: Scary Scythian Customs (4.16-82)" (138–40).

As the back cover of the book promises, the experience of reading it is rather "like reading Herodotus while simultaneously consulting a history of Greece and a scholarly commentary on the text." There is much helpful parenthetical explication of historical background (e.g. on the importance of burial to the ancient Greeks, in the discussion of Arion) as well as lengthier treatments of such historical cruces as whether the False Smerdis was really false, or why the 300 Spartans were chosen from among Spartans with *living* sons. Just occasionally I noted an inaccuracy (e.g. twice "Herodotus says" of 3.80—which is not authorial state-

ment but character speech), or wondered at the interpretation (would a Spartan combing his hair really be as jarring an image to a Persian spy as “a marine checking his lipstick before battle would be to us” (233)? It would perhaps be more jarring to non-Spartan Greeks of Herodotus’ audience than to the well-coiffed Persians).

With glances out to fifth-century literary works (Bacchylides’ *Ode* on Croesus on the pyre, Aeschylus *Persians*) and forward to the Macedonian conquest of Persia and beyond, Hamel opens up a broad historical and cultural perspective. She includes much wondrous comparative material that the Father of History himself would doubtless have appreciated, for example on Vlad the Impaler (whose grim techniques are compared to Astyages’: 45), on the fascinating modern reception of Herodotus’ account of Amasis’ fart (76), and on other people reputed, like Pheretime, to have died by worms. We hear even of a genus of earthworm named Pheretima (296 n. 1). In some instances, the retelling becomes too glib or reductive, e.g. the dramatization of the Spako-Mitradates’ story (39), which elides its power; the rather odd interpretation of Spargapises’ suicide (as having killed himself rather than “face his scary mother again”: 50—which robs the narrative of much of its pathos), or the paraphrase of Amasis’ letter (“Amasis, that is, wanted Polycrates to keep throwing stuff away in order to offset the successes he was enjoying in other respects”: 99–100).

Hamel interjects the occasional comment on Herodotus’ storytelling art (e.g. 32: Herodotus’ presentation of Croesus’ confrontation with Apollo), and useful remarks on some important patterns that have an explanatory role as well as helping his text cohere (e.g. the wise advisor, king, transgression of physical boundaries). But the lay reader could have done with more appreciation of the formidable skill with which Herodotus controlled and wrestled into narrative form such an extraordinary array of material (especially to counter occasional disparagement: “not particularly interesting”: 50; “doesn’t make a lot of sense”: 157)—and more on the principles on which he based his efforts.

Hamel frequently points to probable historical inaccuracies, and alerts readers more generally to the thorny question of the historicity of the stories Herodotus preserves. Herodotus’ Gyges’ narrative is employed as a test case: four alternative versions of Gyges’ accession, preserved in authors from Plato to Justin, bring out how Herodotus has molded his account, “dropping details and introducing dramatic elements and making use of stock narrative motifs. ... Herodotus’ account ..., then, cannot be taken at face value” (13). But Hamel stops there:

no guidance is offered about the processes Herodotus might have followed in shaping his text, about whence and why traditional patterning arises and replaces a more literal truth, and what the narrative effect might be; and we get no sense of Herodotus' text as a literary work shaped under the influence of rhetorical concerns and narrative predecessors (most crucial among them, Homer).

Markers of epistemological uncertainty already pervaded Herodotus' account, in explicit authorial comments, and also in the extraordinary prominence of the so-called "source-citations"—which an abbreviated retelling necessarily elides. It's also quite possible that Herodotus *wanted* readers to have to wrestle somewhat with the complications of his *Histories* and its numerous story strands. And Herodotus deemed *everything* in his *History* interesting. Even an engaging "best parts" abbreviation, like this one, cannot help but go against the grain of these important qualities of Herodotus' text.

Herodotus' text is also pan-Greek (or perhaps even international) in its orientation, whereas *Reading Herodotus* felt destined purely for local American readership, with such linguistic mannerisms as "offed themselves" (= "killed themselves," 83), "D'Oh" (31, 95), "a defeat off of the Peloponnese" (250), and (numerous times), "the guy who."

To lay readers I will continue to recommend Herodotus himself first and foremost in an accessible edition that includes a good introduction and commentary—for example Oxford World Classics or Penguin.

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