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Herodotus: Oral History with a Difference

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The Richard A. F. Penrose Memorial Lecture**

I am honored by the opportunity to stand in for Russell Meiggs, although I share your disappointment at not hearing how he could have shown that Herodotus' *History* was one of those philosophical experiments that, in the words of Benjamin Franklin, "let Light into the Nature of things, . . . increase(d) the Power of Man over Matter, and multipli(ed) the Conveniences or Pleasures of Life."¹ Certainly Franklin himself regarded Herodotus' work in this light, quoting him not only on the origin of the Egyptian calendar² but also to illuminate some 1764 archaeological discoveries in Siberia.³

In the beginning was the Word, but History was not. At least if we are to take Cicero's word for it, Herodotus was the Father of History, and so the birthdate of history must have been delayed till the fifth century B.C. And because recently we have had to reckon with a born-again history which in many ways parallels the fifth-century original, some inquiry into the history of history and how it has come full circle to this new rebirth seems timely. There is, moreover, some prosaic justice in such an inquiry into *both* new beginnings of history, since at least from the point of view of Herodotus and the Greeks history itself is simply inquiry. And the renascent history of the present, like the history which Herodotus fathered, is a matter of asking questions and getting answers. As you know, the new version is called Oral History, rather redundantly in

Herodotean terms, since his inquiries seem to have been almost exclusively oral.

When this Oral History was invented, as the tradition, both oral and written, has it, by Allan Nevins in 1948, there was established at Columbia an Office of Oral History. The idea that history could be oral was apparently strange enough to modern minds nurtured on documents so that the office was more than once referred to as the Office of Oracle History.⁴ Whether there was any suggestion that either the practitioners of oral history or the live subjects they interviewed exhibit authority or merely indulged in oracular ambiguity, is perhaps less important than the unconsciously significant linkage back to Herodotus, for whom oracles not only seemed to motivate historical events but also served to interpret them, as when Croesus was told by Delphi that if he invaded Persia he would destroy a great kingdom,⁵ and because in Herodotus' accounting it never occurred to Croesus that it might be his own kingdom, the oracle is used both to characterize Croesus' arrogance and to justify his defeat.

Oracles aside, it is the oral nature of historical beginnings, both old and new, that we ought to credit partly at least to a lack then as now, but for very different reasons, of certain kinds of documents. Just as the sixth and fifth-century Greeks were able to conduct their business, government, war and worship with little use of the comparatively new-fangled alphabet, so we have reached a point where, although paperwork proliferates and copy-machines work overtime,

* Read 21 April 1983

much important business both private and public is conducted, without benefit of writing, on the telephone and in person when instead of written negotiations people can drive a few miles or fly half the world around to talk face to face. Learning about the background of contemporary and recent events in both circumstances would therefore involve making inquiry of those who took part in or assisted at possibly causative or effective discussions and decisions. And since the individual and personal nature of what Herodotus called inquiry (and the oral historians call interviewing) of those who participated in such activities tended to emphasize the role of personalities and personal motivation, both Herodotus and his latest descendants tend to see history in more or less biographical terms. This same emphasis on personality characterizes even the history resulting from oral inquiry about events and actions of the more distant past, since the human beings who transmitted the accounts to the historians' contemporaries presumably found the personal and human-interest aspects of the tradition most memorable.

It is in relation to this oral tradition about the past that we see another way in which the oral historians of the present seem to recapitulate the beginnings of history. For just as Herodotean inquiries ranged widely enough to include matters of anthropology, ethnology, geology, religion, sociology and zoology, so today's oral historians have suddenly found themselves overlapping and cooperating with folklorists who have long been interviewing the folk in order to assure the preservation of traditions not only about past events but also about folkways and all kinds of interactions with the world of nature. As one American folklorist, Richard Dorson, said in 1971:⁶

The old rigid polarization between history as scrupulously documented fact, and folklore as unverified rumor, falsehood, hearsay, old wives' tales—often equated with myth and legend in similar senses—is beginning to break down. His-

torians are moving closer to the methods of the folklorist through the new departure of oral history, and folklorists are becoming more history-minded as their discipline solidifies.

He later noted one difference in methodology: "The oral historian interviews while the folklorist in the field collects. It would never occur to a practitioner of oral history to set out in the morning toting his Sony or Wollensak . . . with little or no idea as to whom he will meet and record. . . . Yet this is exactly the way the folklorist operates." And if we may judge from his results, Herodotus combined both methods and both disciplines. When he explored Egypt, for example, he inquired from various people about everything from the activities of past pharaohs⁷ to why at one season all the Nile fish have bruises on one side of their heads,⁸ with side excursions into the source and nature of the Nile⁹ as well as embalming techniques and rituals involving cats and crocodiles.¹⁰

Let's look at a few other aspects of oral history today so that we may compare or contrast its problems and solutions with those of Herodotus, so that seeing what oral historians have found to be pitfalls and advantages in oral inquiry we may better understand Herodotus, and so that we may see how Oral History plays its part in the very Herodotean effort of the New History to base our knowledge of the past more broadly, on the principle that it is not only actions of governments but also the thoughts and passions of the governed that are important if we are to *realize* the past. In this endeavor the orientation of Herodotus and the Greeks was perhaps more useful than our own. For we think of ourselves as walking boldly, if somewhat blindly, into the future, either fleeing or pushed by the past behind us. The Greeks, on the other hand, saw themselves as facing the past and seeing it all, shading back into the mists of memory and myth, while the future, which they could not see, was behind them.

Oral History has been characterized in various ways, ranging from Barbara Tuchman's charge¹¹ that "oral history gathers trash and trivia with all the discrimination of a vacuum cleaner" to Edmund Spenser's unconscious prediction of its function and purpose:¹²

For deeds do die, however nobile donne,
And thoughts of men do as themselves decay,
But wise wordes taught in numbers for to runne,
Recorded by the Muses, live for ay.

Walter Lord, a popular practitioner of the art sees oral history as a way "to get the guts of the event, the heart of it."¹³ And Saul Benison asserts the value of oral inquiry in the history of medicine by emphasizing that more important than the detailing of discoveries is an understanding of the personality and mind-set that led to them.¹⁴ Finally, Louis Starr writes in the article on Oral History in the *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Science*:¹⁵ "Oral history is more than a tool and less than a discipline."

Practitioners of Oral History are very quick to see the danger of assuming that oral history can tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, and they must constantly deal with the problem of "knowing what kind of credence to give to a statement made many years after the event."¹⁶ Since an oral interview, particularly of a very important person whose decisions and actions are the raw material of history, has much in common with autobiography, although the subject is perhaps less guarded than in the formal written account, oral historians recognize that they may have to allow for and compensate for their subject's natural and probably even unconscious desire both to see himself and have others see his actions in the best historical light. Checks to be applied obviously include both independent testimony, oral as well as written, and real evidence of internal consistency. James MacGregor Burns's recollections of the way in which Colonel "Sam" Marshall inter-

viewed men just after combat in the Pacific are an example:

(The colonel) was very impressed with the old adage that on the day of battle truths lie naked, but soon they put on their uniforms. . . . First we would hear perhaps from a first sergeant or a platoon sergeant who would give an account from his perspective, which might have been a hundred yards back from a particular action, and it would seem so authentic, and like the whole story, and consistent with our documents. And then we would begin to call on the corporals and the privates who would each stand up, and this was very low level. It was who was shooting from that tree, and what tank came over here. What impressed me was how the perspective changed as we moved from actor to actor and got so many perspectives on what looked initially like so simple an action.¹⁷

It is perhaps because Herodotus' interviews were for the most part limited to the equivalent of corporals and privates that his battle accounts are so lacking in overall strategy and tactics and consist so much of whose ship rammed whose and how particular soldiers reacted to the enemy's charge. For even his military inexperience and ignorance of military matters are not sufficient to explain the lack of completeness and overall view in his accounts. But it is true that, since Herodotus was born during the Persian Wars in which his *History* culminates, his inquiries must for the most part have been second- or third- or fourth-hand. He was thus necessarily most often dependent on the hearsay of oral tradition that present-day oral historians prefer to leave to folklorists. And an oral tradition handed down by a people who had won a great victory against overwhelming odds would have been peculiarly subject to embroidery and inflation. From our point of view, however, this was perhaps no bad thing, since it is probable that the popular astonishment and need to explain how the impossible had happened provided the background and incentive for Herodotean inquiry and thus the birth of history.

Whether Herodotus, like present-day oral historians, regularly attempted to check oral sources against written testimony is unclear. One example suggests this possibility; he is writing of the Athenian eviction of certain Pelasgians and says:

Whether they were justified in doing this is not clear; all I can offer are two contradictory accounts, that of the Athenians themselves, on the one side, and of Hecataeus the son of Hegesander on the other. Hecataeus in his book maintains that the Athenians were in the wrong. . . .

And after giving the two accounts Herodotus concludes: "There, then, are the two accounts: that of the Athenians on the one hand, and of Hecataeus on the other."¹⁸ Both sources were at least second-hand, and there was certainly bias on the part of the Athenians in justifying their action, but Herodotus gives *both* equal time and, by refusing to choose between them, suggests the possibility that the written version may have been equally prejudiced, if, for example, Hecataeus or his source had an anti-Athenian bias. But it does happen occasionally that by the lucky chance of a document's preservation *we* can check the result of Herodotus' inquiry against written testimony. So Herodotus reports that the Persian king Darius needed to name his successor and had to decide between the claims of two sons by different mothers—his eldest son and the one who was born to him first after his accession to the throne. Herodotus goes on to tell of the exiled Spartan king who happened to be at the Persian court and advised Darius that in Sparta the law was that in such a case it was the son born to the father after he was king who succeeded. Herodotus' most likely source, whether direct or indirect, for such Spartan influence on the Persian kingship will have been the exiled Spartan king himself, whose boast any self-respecting oral historian would reasonably wish to check. And such a check does exist, for however dubious that assertion of

influence may be, the two sons' conflicting claims which could have given rise to it are confirmed by a surviving Persian inscription in which Xerxes asserts that his father chose him in preference to other sons.¹⁹ It looks as if even an exiled Spartan king of the fifth century B.C. found it more convincing to embroider a kernel of truth than to fashion his suit out of the whole cloth.

In general, of course, we know far more about the ways of present-day oral historians, who are a very vocal lot, than we can even guess about Herodotus' method of inquiry. Without documents *could* he have made the kind of checks for conscious or unconscious bias that oral historians automatically make? Compare what the oral historian Forrest Pogue wrote:²⁰

General Marshall once asked me how I could be sure if what he was telling me in 1957 was not something he had made up recently or that it did not reflect something he thought about only recently. And I said, . . . 'About every tenth question I give you is something to which I already know the answer from your testimony in the 1940s or letters you wrote at this particular time.'

Perhaps an equivalent awareness of how later events might affect the memory of an earlier time is shown by Herodotus when, after reporting an anecdote in which the Persian defeat is predicted before the event, he says "This tale, as I have said, I heard from Thersander of Orchomenus; he also told me that he repeated it soon after to various people before the battle of Plataea."²¹

As for tests of internal consistency, at least in the tradition, Herodotus himself is quick to apply and record them. Three examples show the critical way in which he accepted what was reported to him.

I can not say for certain how it was that Scyllias managed to reach the Greeks, and the commonly accepted account is, at the least, doubtful; for, according to this, he dived under the water at Aphetæ and did not come up until he reached

Artemisium—a distance of about ten miles. There are other somewhat tall tales, beside this, told about Scyllias—and also a few true ones; as to the one I have just related, my personal opinion is that he came to Artemisium in a boat.²²

And again:

There are some who maintain that these men who came back from Egypt actually defeated Polycrates; I think, however, that this is unlikely to be true, because if they were strong enough to have dealt with Polycrates unaided, there would have been no need for them to call on the Lacedaemonians for assistance; moreover, it is unreasonable to suppose that a man with so large a paid army and force of native bowmen could be defeated by the exiled Samians, who were but few in number.²³

A third example involves the conflicting versions of two cities concerning the war and hostility between them. In this case Herodotus reports the evidence which each city cites in support of its claim and concludes: "In this conflict of evidence, you may agree with whichever party you think is telling the truth."²⁴

As professionals, oral historians cannot abdicate their responsibility in this way and leave up to the reader the choice between versions which contradict each other. Herodotus, although the Father of History, was little more than an amateur and apparently assumed that just as the telling of different versions results from different interests, so the accepting and believing of one or another may be similarly motivated. Thus, after telling an Athenian story about the Corinthian fleet's treachery in running away from the battle of Salamis, he concludes: "This, as I said, is an Athenian story, and the Corinthians do not admit the truth of it: on the contrary, they believe that their ships played a most distinguished part in the battle—and the rest of Greece gives evidence in their favor."²⁵ Similarly, after reporting that it was the Greek Ephialtes who betrayed to Xerxes the existence of the mountain path which allowed the Persians to take the Greek army

in the rear at Thermopylae, he adds that in another version two other men were charged with the betrayal. But "This is entirely unconvincing, my first criterion being the fact that the Amphictyons, presumably after careful inquiry, set a price not upon these men but upon Ephialtes, and my second, that there is no doubt that the accusation of treachery was the reason for Ephialtes' flight."²⁶ Rather different is the alternate account of the way in which the Persian army provided itself with water when it crossed the Arabian desert: the first account tells how camel-skins were filled with water, loaded on live camels, and thus conveyed into the desert to await the army's coming.

That (he says) at any rate is the more credible account; there is also another, which I ought to mention, though it is not so easy to believe. According to this, the Arabian king had cowhides and other skins stitched together to form a pipe long enough to reach from the Corys river . . . all the way to the desert; here he had large reservoirs constructed, filled them by means of the pipe, and so stored the water. The water was brought to three separate places, over a total distance—between river and desert—of a twelve days' journey.²⁷

Generally indeed Herodotus sees himself not as an arbiter of truth but as a researcher somewhat more interested in what is reported than in exactly what was done. Twice in his *History* he states this explicitly: "Anyone may believe these Egyptian tales, if he is sufficiently credulous; as for myself, I keep to the general plan of this work, which is to record the traditions of the various nations just as I heard them related to me."²⁸ And the second: "My business is to record what people say, but I am by no means bound to believe it—and that may be taken to apply to this work as a whole."²⁹

The oral historians of today are also interested in recording what people say, but the recording is preferably on tape, which is later transcribed and edited; only then does it become the raw material of history. Two

of the guidelines for interviewers adopted by the Oral History Association in 1980 are indicative:

The interviewer should strive to prompt informative dialogue through challenging and perceptive inquiry, should be grounded in the background and experiences of the person being interviewed, and, if possible, should review the sources relating to the interviewee before conducting the interview. Interviewers should extend the inquiry beyond their immediate needs to make each interview as complete as possible for the benefit of others. . . .³⁰

And in addition, in order to get the testimony direct and pure, unfiltered through the mind of the interviewer, the tape recorder is regarded as especially valuable.

The extent to which Herodotus' digestion of the accounts which he elicited changed them in any material way is especially difficult to estimate. It might be thought that the moral point of view which so consistently characterizes all parts of his work is enough to make it likely that he, as it were, homogenized all accounts, no matter what the source, but the testimony of contemporary tragedy suggests that Herodotus was not alone in moralizing thus and that the so-called tragic philosophy of history tells us more about the general climate of opinion in fifth century B.C. Greece than any of the factual material he records. That he was in every way a conscientious reporter and indefatigable in his inquiry is apparent from the way in which he sought out individuals and groups who could add to material he had already collected. So in his account of the settlement of Cyrene he says: "Up to this point the Lacedaemonians and the Theraeans tell the same story; what follows is on the authority of the Theraeans only."³¹ And again later: "I have related the foregoing on the authority of the Theraeans only; for the sequel, the people of Cyrene are in agreement with them."³² So also in recounting the origin of the Scythians he records

first their own story (that they are the youngest of all nations and are descended from Zeus and the river Borysthenes, which Herodotus does not believe), then that of the Black Sea Greeks (that the Scythians were descended from Heracles and a local half-woman-half-snake, about which Herodotus does not comment), and finally, "There is another story which I myself consider the most likely of the three. This relates how the nomadic tribes of Scythians who lived in Asia, being hard pressed by the Massagetae, were forced across the Araxes into . . . what is now Scythia."³³ Stating a preference for one particular version was perhaps as far as it seemed right to Herodotus to go. When we agree with him as we do in the case of the Scythians, we do not feel that he should have given reasons for his preference, but our reaction is different as regards the explanations he gives for the Spartan king Cleomenes' mad suicide:

Most people in Greece think that that was a punishment for having corrupted the Priestess at Delphi and inducing her to say what she did say about Demaratus; the Athenians, however, put it down to his devastating the sacred land of Demeter and Persephone, when he marched to Eleusis; while the Argives maintain that it was a punishment for his sacrilege when, after a battle, he fetched the Argive fugitives from the holy ground of Argos, and cut them to pieces. . . . His own countrymen, however, deny that his madness was a punishment from heaven; they are convinced, on the contrary, that he lost his wits because, in his association with the Scythians, he had acquired the habit of drinking his wine neat. . . . My own opinion is that Cleomenes came to grief as a punishment for what he did to Demaratus.³⁴

Here he follows the majority opinion, less because it was the majority opinion than because he shared the majority need to respect and reverence the oracle and Delphi and so viewed the effort to corrupt it as a most heinous sin.

Comparison between Herodotus and the oral historians is made more difficult because for Herodotus we have only the result of his researches with nothing but speculation as to how he conducted them, whereas with the oral historians the emphasis seems to be more on the techniques of gathering material while the result differs remarkably little from orthodox documentary history. Interviews are used as if they were written documents and as if all the material was somehow to be spun into a single strand of truth. The techniques of interviewing are all-engrossing for many oral historians, as a possible title for a talk proposed by Philip Crowl suggests: "Some Considerations concerning the Care and Handling of Oral History Interviewees, based on my Experience as Director of the John Foster Dulles Project of Princeton University."³⁵ One wonders if Herodotus sometimes entertained his friends with such an inside account of his researches and whether for his Persian War project he had anything like the 279 interviews Crowl can boast or whether he could not even begin to count the number of inquiries he had made over years of research. After all, the sources which he credits for the material which seems to need some guarantee of respectability or for which he does not wish to take responsibility are, with only three exceptions, peoples rather than individuals. It is the Lydians who say this, or the Athenians who say that, or the Persians who say the other thing. What we shall never know is how many individuals are comprised in those ethnic opinions, but the generality of the point of view is somewhat confirmed by the very specialness of the information credited to the individuals in the three exceptions. All three concern matters that would have been known by only one person, or very few, for example: "I myself once met . . . the grandson of this Archias. . . . He told me that his father had been called Samius in memory of his grandfather's heroic death in Samos, and his respect for the Samians was due to the fact

that they had honored his grandfather with a public funeral."³⁶ When a *people* is credited with a story or other material, it is likely, given his readiness to present variant versions, that he is reflecting general agreement, however many people he may have consulted. As to possible numbers, it looks from the anecdotes which he tells concerning the advance of the huge Persian army from Asia into Greece and the local reactions to it all along the way that, as he followed the line of march thirty or forty years later, he talked to individual old-timers as he went and strung their perhaps exaggerated reminiscences together.

So, if we may borrow Levi-Strauss's convenient and picturesque terms for the nature-culture polarization, Herodotus' work is history in the raw while that of the oral historians, like that of the other modern historians, is cooked—that is, natural inquiry or research is contrasted with the cultivated sort. But, although Herodotus' *History* often seems like undigested raw material, there is both an overall design more dependent on cause and effect than on chronology and an insight into the human condition that informs the whole with what is more nearly a mythical truth than a factual truth. For Herodotus' heritage is both oral tradition and a literature of poetry. And although he obviously delights in the particular for its infinite variety, it is the universal aspects of men's lives that fill his pages with patterns. For in both poetry and oral tradition facts take part not only for facts' sake but also because they play a role in the explanation and validation of things as they are, thus helping preserve "what's memorable, noteworthy and representatively human."³⁷

With such a heritage why and how did Herodotus turn to research of the more or less recent events instead of continuing to deal with the heroic past, as we are told his uncle Panyasis did? Partly it was the influence of his older contemporaries who were putting into prose genealogical and geo-

graphical accounts and outlines, and partly it was the climate of philosophical and moral opinion that produced both Attic tragedy and pre-scientific inquiry into the causes of things. It was by combining the factual research of the new prose-writers with the narrative style and story-interest of the older poets and the search for understanding of man and nature carried on by the tragedians and philosophers that Herodotus invented history.

Some insight into the extent to which Herodotus' work was a new departure may be gained by a quick look at one type of subject matter inherited from the past which he shared with contemporary tragedians, that is, myths of the heroic age. Take, for example, the myths of Thebes which are so well known to us from tragedy: Oedipus' patricide, incest and self-blinding; his sons' fratricide, his daughter's suicide; Pentheus' denial of the god Dionysus and murder at the hands of his mother, maddened by the god; Creon's sacrifice of one son and loss of another and his wife by suicide; all these against a background of Cadmean dragon-slaying, teeth-sowing and divine interference. What does Herodotus have to say about Thebes' heroic age and why does it enter into a work which he describes as dealing with the great deeds of Greeks and barbarians and through what cause they came into conflict? In the first place his overriding interest in superlatives of all sorts led him to inquire particularly into first causes and origins. And for these he was often necessarily dependent on that part of oral tradition that led back into myth. So we find him referring to the Theban founder Cadmus' role in the settling of Thera,³⁸ in the importing of the alphabet,³⁹ and in introducing the worship of Dionysus into Greece;⁴⁰ the Theban-born mother of the first two Spartan kings⁴¹ as well as a variety of prehistoric hostilities like the Cadmean eviction of Dorians,⁴² the Argive eviction of Cadmeans,⁴³ and the Athenians' rescue of

Argives fallen at Thebes.⁴⁴ It is perhaps not particularly surprising that one family should exhibit such extremes of destructive and constructive behavior, but Herodotus' complete avoidance of what appeared in the tragic side of the picture is notable. It is not possible that he was ignorant of stories which were part and parcel of what he does record. Nor is it possible that he limited himself to material that would be new to his audience, since at least some of what he does report was surely common knowledge. Even less likely is it that he objected to either tragedy or the seamier side of family life, enjoying as he so obviously does both the dramatic death of Croesus' son⁴⁵ and Xerxes' sordid palace intrigue.⁴⁶ Apparently the principle on which he was operating combined rational credibility with relevance, so that in dealing with prehistoric material he was most likely to take what we call legend and let the more mythic items go.

That traditions from the prehistoric period included both mythical and legendary elements seems to be an almost inevitable consequence of two basic human needs: (1) to understand and reconcile natural forces both without and within; and (2) to establish an identity in space and time. As obverse and reverse of the same coin, myth and legend could use the same personalities, whether divine or human, both as ideal actors on a universal stage and as real figures in particular landscapes. Since the vitality of the tradition would depend on its utility, the proportions of the two elements would for various peoples and various times be different, and the body of myth-legend would be subject to a kind of evolution in which the survival of the fittest meant that men preserved what most satisfied their needs.

As historian, Herodotus gives us insight into what the legend-preserving part of the human mind found important, just as the tragedians, dealing with all kinds of human predicaments, show how what had originated as myths could be used to increase

comprehension and evoke a useful emotional response. Most often, it is likely, Herodotus is recording what he was told and so reflects what must have been the common tendency to substantiate claims to antiquity, territory, primacy, and so on by tracing them back to mythical figures. As a result, by recording for us beliefs current in his day he provides us with the kind of information about his own time that oral historians believe should be gathered today both for current history and the historians of the future. Just as current oral historians have begun to be infected with the folklore germ, so Herodotus seems not to have been very much concerned whether the grist for his mill was mythical-legendary or historical—always providing, of course, that he could use historical criteria of rational credibility and relevance to grind the legendary material to the appropriate consistency. The result was a continuation in prosaic terms of what had long been done in poetic practice, showing how Herodotus justified his diverse inheritance.

The mythical material that oral historians today have to deal with is of a rather different sort—myths in the more modern sense of lies and propaganda. With regard to either kind of myth as told of outstanding personalities one parallel between an oral historian's estimate of Huey Long and Herodotus' evaluation of the Persian king Cyrus is both relevant and revealing; T. Harry Williams writes:

One (myth) is that the Long family was abjectly poor. You see this is everything that's been written about him, that they were abjectly poor. Interestingly, this myth was largely created by Huey himself, partly out of mischief to tantalize northern reporters, partly to let his followers know that although he knew their hard life, he had risen above it.⁴⁷

Herodotus' comment as he was about to launch into a biographical account of Cyrus is: "I could, if I wished, give three versions

of Cyrus's history, all different from what follows; but I propose to base my account on those Persian authorities who seem to tell the simple truth about him without trying to exaggerate his exploits."⁴⁸ Given the Persian kings' habit of ordering monumental inscriptions which describe in laudatory terms their apparently endless conquests and other achievements, Herodotus' scepticism seems reasonable as far as the Persian accounts are concerned. What is more puzzling to us is his designation of the account he does give as the simple truth, since it involves such mythical motifs as cluster variously around great heroes of fact and fiction like Moses, Oedipus, Romulus and Remus: the dream or prophecy of an unborn child's destined power; the fear of that power leading to the exposure of the child; the miraculous rescue of the exposed child, who is sometimes suckled by an animal. Presumably, Herodotus found this version more acceptable and truer as being more familiar, since it was like the patterned kind of stories that he knew from Homer and other early Greek literature and tradition. That such patterned stories were by the very fact of their patterning in large part fiction may be clear to us, but for a fifth-century Greek seeking some semblance of reason and regularity in an apparently haphazard world that same patterning would have seemed to be a satisfying confirmation of order and system. So seeing fictions as truth Herodotus would not have been in a position to know that truth is stranger than fiction, not realizing that what happens by happenstance has no obligation to conform to the human expectations of what is satisfying, right and fitting that govern successful fiction. Today's oral historians, and folklorists as well, have the advantage of centuries of research in both history and literature, so that they can recognize and discount such floating motifs as creep into orally transmitted accounts. But the folklorist Richard Dorson at least would see value in Herodotus' preference, even if

the actual facts of Cyrus' infancy are lost: "What the oral folk historian wishes to record is not the plain unvarnished fact but all the notions, biases, and reactions aroused by the supposed fact, for in them lie the historical perspectives of the folk."⁴⁹

Summing up, we might say that it is in the most primitive sense that Herodotus' *History* is both oral and history. It is most primitively oral in comparison with the tape-recorded interviews of people either involved in or affected by contemporary events in that for lack of written accounts of the past it depends on the collection of hearsay and mouth-to-mouth traditions from people nurtured on myth and in search of order and meaning. (One is reminded here of the modern tendency to formulate conspiracy theories to explain apparently senseless events because of that same human need for, and dependence on, rationality and significance.)

Herodotus' *History* is primitive history in comparison with what is ordinarily thought of as history today in that it was inquiry into anything and everything people might talk about, including the different views that different people might express about the same thing, and not limited to human activity of a political, economic, and military nature. For example, in Herodotus' account of the battle of Salamis a bare six pages are devoted to the battle, and of these more than three are concerned with particular ship-duels or individual exploits, whereas nine pages were taken up with accounts of Xerxes' post-battle intentions, deliberations, messages home with a description of the Persian postal sys-

tem, and his ignominious return from Greece, complete with the life-history of his top eunuch. This proportion of military to personal and incidental subject matter gives insight into both what Herodotus considered important, interesting and relevant and what his audience may have been eager for.

Not only did that audience find satisfaction in Herodotus' choice and presentation of material, but readers have continued for 2,400 years to find pleasure in, as well as finding fault with, the ways in which he went about inventing history. His methods of inquiry were dictated by the force of circumstance, and beginning with his most immediate successor, Thucydides, the effort to improve on the scope, accuracy and factual nature of his account—its historicity, in fact—has given us such great works as Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* and Carlyle's *French Revolution*.

The recent return of oral historians to some of Herodotus' methods and subjects seems to stem in part from gaps in documentation but even more perhaps from the twentieth-century combination of personality cult and concern for the common man. Whether the works of these oral historians will achieve Herodotus' longevity seems unlikely but that may depend less on their intrinsic worth than on some failure in the process of man's perfectability. At all events, the relation of today's Oral History to Herodotus' original version was unconsciously characterized by William Leuchtenburg's flippant comment on the new technique: "It's very useful, but it's not the Second Coming."⁵⁰

NOTES

1. Benjamin Franklin, "A Proposal for Promoting Useful Knowledge among the British Plantations in America," *American Philosophical Society Year Book 1981*, p. 12.
2. *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, edited by Leonard W. Labaree (1970), vol. 4, p. 243.
3. *Op cit.*, vol. 14, pp. 212–213; cf. also vol. 11, p. 522.
4. *First National Colloquium on Oral History*, Lake Arrowhead, California, 1966, p. 2.
5. Herodotus i.53.3.
6. *Selections from the Fifth and Sixth National Colloquia on Oral History* (1972) pp. 40–42.
7. Herodotus ii.99–182.
8. Herodotus ii.93.3.
9. Herodotus ii.17–27.
10. Herodotus ii.66–70.
11. "Research in Contemporary Events for the Writing of History," *Proceedings of the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the National Institute of Arts and Letters*, Second series no. 22 (1972) p. 62.

12. *The Ruines of Time*, lines 400–404.
13. *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Science*, vol. 20, s.v. Oral History, p. 458.
14. "Oral History. A Personal View" in Edwin Clarke, *Modern Methods in the History of Medicine* (1971) pp. 286–305.
15. *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Science*, vol. 20, s.v. Oral History, p. 454.
16. William E. Leuchtenburg in *The Second National Colloquium on Oral History* (1968), p. 3.
17. *Selections from the Fifth and Sixth National Colloquia on Oral History* (1972), p. 26.
18. Herodotus vi.137. All passages quoted from Herodotus are taken from the translation of Aubrey de Selincourt (Penguin Classics).
19. Herodotus vii-1–4; R. G. Kent, *Old Persian* (1950), p. 163.
20. *Selections from the Fifth and Sixth National Colloquia on Oral History* (1972) p. 37.
21. Herodotus ix.16.5.
22. Hdt. viii.8.3.
23. Hdt. iii.45.3.
24. Hdt. v.45.
25. Hdt. viii.94.
26. Hdt. vii.213.
27. Hdt. iii.9.
28. Hdt. ii.123.1.
29. Hdt. vii.152.3.
30. *The Oral History Review* 1980, p. 8.
31. Hdt. iv.150.1.
32. Hdt. iv.154.
33. Hdt. iv.5–12.
34. Hdt. vi.75–84.
35. *The Second National Colloquium on Oral History* (1968), p. 73.
36. Hdt. iii.55.2.
37. *The Oral History Review* 1981, p. 2.
38. Hdt. iv.145.
39. Hdt. v.57.
40. Hdt. ii.49.
41. Hdt. vi.52.
42. Hdt. i.56.
43. Hdt. v.61.
44. Hdt. ix.2.
45. Hdt. i.34–45.
46. Hdt. ix.108–111.
47. *Selections from the Fifth and Sixth National Colloquia on Oral History* (1972), p. 26.
48. Hdt. i.95.
49. *Selections from the Fifth and Sixth National Colloquia on Oral History* (1972), p. 48.
50. *The Second National Colloquium on Oral History* (1968), p. 5.