

Stimulus of Wars

Wars have always acted as a stimulus to history writing. Hecataeus and Herodotus were stirred by the Graeco-Persian conflicts (499-479 BC), and later, in the same century, Thucydides was moved by the Peloponnesian war (431-404 BC). War, down to our own times, has been a stimulus to the writing of history.

5. Herodotus (c. 484-430 BC)

The historical genius of Herodotus and Thucydides triumphed over two apparently insurmountable difficulties, namely, the absence of records, and an anti-historical philosophy which held history to be a hopeless endeavor.

Herodotus was born in an exalted family in Halicarnassus about 484 BC. His uncle's adventures earned him an exile at the age of thirty-two. The future historian profitably spent his undesired exile in far-reaching travels. These took him to Phoenicia, Egypt, Cyrene, Susa, and finally to the Greek city-states on the Black Sea. *Writes Will Durant:*

Wherever he went he observed and inquired with the eye of a scientist and the curiosity of a child; and when in 447, he settled down in Athens, he was armed with a rich assortment of notes concerning the geography, history, and manners of the Mediterranean states. With these notes and a little plagiarizing of Hecataeus and other predecessors, he composed the most famous of all historical works, recording the life and history of Egypt, the Near East and Greece from their legendary origins to the close of the Persian war.⁷

Theme and Content

The man known as the 'Father of History' announces in his introduction that the purpose of his *Historia* was to preserve for future generations the great deeds of the Greeks and the Barbarians (Persians), and lay bare the causes for which they waged war. Written in nine parts, each of which is dedicated to one of the nine uses, the work has for its main theme the Graeco-Persian conflict which comes to its epic end at Salamis in 480 BC. But Herodotus brought into his narrative interesting descriptions of the times, dress, manners, morals and beliefs of some twenty-four

different peoples of the eastern Mediterranean. The immense framework of the book makes it, in a limited sense, a universal history.

Method

Herodotus's method was to write of far-off events reported to him at second or third hand. With curiosity and keen powers of observation he tried to know how things happened. He looked for rational explanations, showing the influence of climate and geographical factors. But he was liable to impute important events to trivial incidental causes, the influence of women, and purely personal factors. His belief in supernatural influences led him to introduce into his narrative dreams, oracles, visions and divine warnings of approaching evil. His childlike curiosity sometimes led to childlike credulity. Indeed, Strabo wrote that there was "much non-sense in Herodotus."⁸ He thought that—the semen of Ethiopians was black; Egyptian cats jumped into fire; Danubians got drunk on mere smells; the priestess of Athena at Pedasus grew a mighty beard; Nebuchadnezzar was a woman; and that the Alps were a river. But he wrote in self-defence, "I am under obligation to tell what is reported, but I am not obliged to believe it; and let this hold for every narrative in this history."⁹

Style

Herodotus is patriotic in the treatment of fellow Greeks but he justly gives both sides of most political disputes and testifies to the heroism, honour and chivalry of the Persians. The father of history is also the father of prose composition and, as a narrator, he has never been surpassed. He wrote in a style which was at once loose, easygoing, romantic and fascinating, satisfying men's need for entertainment, for marvellous stories. And writing in terms of personalities rather than processes, he presented excellent portrayals of character.

Assessment

Whatever his faults, Herodotus was the first to have sought a perspective of man in time. Cicero called him the 'Father of History', and Lucian, like most of the ancients, ranked him above

Thucydides.¹⁰ Shotwell describes him as the 'Homer of the Persian Wars'. H.E. Barnes looks upon him as "the first writer to imply that the task of the historian is to reconstruct the whole past life of man and was one of the most absorbing story-tellers in the entire course of historical writing."¹¹

Collingwood credits Herodotus with the creation of scientific history. He puts Herodotus to all the four tests of modern historiography and finds him wanting only in not basing his narrative on rational evidence and interpretation. It was Herodotus who created real history. By skilful questioning he made it possible to obtain scientific knowledge of past human actions which had been thought to be impossible. "It is the use of this word ('history'), and its implications, that make Herodotus the father of history. The conversion of legend-writing into the science of history... was a fifth century invention, and Herodotus was the man who invented it."¹²

6. Thucydides (c. 460–396 BC)

Born to an Athenian father and Thracian mother, Thucydides received all the education that Athens could give. In 430 BC he suffered from the plague but death spared him for history. When the Peloponnesian war broke out, he kept a record of it from day to day. In 424 BC he was chosen as one of the two generals to command a naval expedition to Thrace, but a military failure earned him an exile from Athens. This misfortune proved fortunate for history, for Thucydides spent the next twenty years of his life in travel especially in the Peloponnesus. The oligarchic revolution of 404 BC ended his exile, and he returned to Athens. He died – some say by murder – about 396 BC leaving unfinished his *History of the Peloponnesian War*.

Theme and Content

As a young man Thucydides had heard Herodotus's public readings of his *History of the Persian Wars* in Athens. Unlike Herodotus who ranged from age to age and place to place, Thucydides confined himself to the narrower scope of the Peloponnesian war, forcing his story into a rigid chronological framework of seasons—the 'summer and winter' system. The *History of the Peloponnesian War* comprises eight books, the eighth book ending abruptly in the middle of a

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ORIENT LONGMAN PRIVATE LIMITED

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e-mail : hyd2_Orlongco@sancharnet.in

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e-mail : olldel@del6.vsnl.net.in