Moral History from Herodotus to Diodorus Siculus

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The question of moral didacticism has in recent years increasingly become part of the discussion of Herodotus’ Histories. Scholars are largely divided into those who are content to see some moral aspect to the Histories, and those who apparently believe that admitting such an aspect to the work denies it the title of history.¹ I hope to show in the following that the moral lessons are certainly there, but also that this places Herodotus completely in line with the genre of historiography that developed after him, rather than separating his work from it.

PREFACE

In the opening lines of the Histories, Herodotus states his name, the type of his work, and his purpose in committing it to writing:

Ἡροδότου Ἁλικαρνησσέος ἱστορίης ἀπόδεξις ἥδε, ὡς μήτε τὰ γενόμενα ἐξ ἀνθρώπων τῷ χρόνῳ ἐξίτηλα γένηται, μήτε ἔργα μεγάλα τε καὶ θωμαστά, τὰ μὲν Ἕλλησι τὰ δὲ βαρβάροισι ἀποδεχθέντα, ἀκλεᾶ γένηται, τὰ τε άλλα καὶ δι᾽ ἧν αἰτίην ἐπολέμησαν ἄλληλοισι.

This is the presentation of the inquiry of Herodotus of Halicarnassus, in order that events that have occurred through human agency shall not become extinct because of the course of time and that the great and marvellous deeds demonstrated by both the Greeks and the barbarians shall not lose their fame – and that goes both for their other actions and achievements and for the reason why they began to be at war with one another. (Hdt. 1.1.1)

¹ The main proponents of the theory that Herodotus’ purpose was at least partly moral-didactic are Harrison (2000) and Fisher (2002). Waters (1971) and Shimron (1989) argue vehemently against the Histories being moralising in any way. Grethlein (2011) discusses ‘exemplarity’ in Herodotus (and Thucydides), but limits himself to instances of characters learning from or failing to learn from the past.
In this proem to the first extant work of historiography in Western civilisation, the purpose of history is set out purely as memorial with no hint of didacticism. It is followed by a whirlwind account of abductions of girls from the East by Greeks and from Greece by Eastern peoples, culminating in the ‘Second Preface’ or second first-person statement about the contents of the work:

ταῦτα μέν νυν Πέρσαι τε καὶ Φοίνικες λέγουσι· ἐγὼ δὲ περὶ μὲν τούτων οὐκ ἔρχομαι εἰρήνως ὡς οὕτω ἢ ἄλλως κοι ταῦτα ἐγένετο, τὸν δὲ οἶδα αὐτὸς πρῶτον ὑπάρξαντα ἀδίκων ἔργων ἐς τοὺς Ἑλλήνας, τοῦτον σημῆνας προβήσομαι ἐς τὸ πρόσω τοῦ λόγου, ὁμοίως σμικρά καὶ μεγάλα ἄστεα ἀνθρώπων ἐπεξιών. τὰ γὰρ τὸ πάλαι μεγάλα ἦν, τὰ πολλὰ σμικρὰ καὶ μεγάλα ἄστεα ἀνθρώπων γέγονε· τὰ δὲ ἐπ᾽ ἐμὲ ἦν μεγάλα, πρότερον ἦν σμικρά. τὴν ἀνθρωπηίην ὤν ἐπιστάμενος εὐδαιμονίην οὐδαμὰ ἐν τῷ μένουσαν, ἐπιμνήσομαι ἀμφοτέρων ὁμοίως.

Now this is what the Persians and the Phoenicians say. I cannot say with regard to these events whether they happened like this or in some other way, but the man I know was the first to commit crimes against the Greeks I shall point out, and then proceed from that point to the subsequent narrative, talking about small and big cities of men alike. For those that were once big have for the most part become small, and those that were big in my time, were once small. Knowing that human happiness never stays long in the same place I shall mention both equally. (Hdt. 1.5.3–4)

The Second Preface, as has often been pointed out, reveals the narrative of the girl abductions to be a false start, a semi-mythological tit-for-tat explanation of a great war that will not do on its own as a causal explanation in Herodotus’ more analytical inquiry.\(^2\) The basis for the Histories is rather going to be secure knowledge (τὸν δὲ οἶδα αὐτὸς . . . ) located in historical, evidence-based time. Here the purpose of the work is presented partly as explaining the beginning of hostilities between Greeks and barbarians, partly as preserving the memory of deeds performed everywhere in the world, in both small and big cities. The last two sentences of the Second Preface set out the earliest indication of the prominent role the instability of human success is going to play in the work, but it does not indicate that the work is also going to be teaching its audience any lessons about how to handle this.

This absence of moral didacticism from the purpose statements certainly sets the Histories apart from the works of Polybius and Diodorus, which we discussed in Part I. However, it has often been observed that Herodotus’ prefaces are hugely inadequate as an indication of the actual contents of the Histories: the richness of the work, its large ethnographical component

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\(^2\) The best analysis of Herodotus’ two prefaces is still Moles (1993).
and its wealth of digressions and colourful vignettes are only dimly hinted at in the vague expression ‘their other great deeds’ (τὰ τε ἄλλα). The fact that the Histories contains much material and many narrative threads not hinted at by the prefaces reveals these as the first baby-steps – wobbly, but impressive – of a nascent tradition of prose preface writing. This makes it legitimate to look for themes and messages in the work not signalled by the prefaces.

Moreover, we know from Diodorus’ Bibliotheca that the concept of historiography as memorial can be closely intertwined with the idea of history as teacher, when readers follow the historiographical examples in order to be memorialised in their turn. Such a motivation for action is certainly seen in Herodotus’ Histories, most prominently in Leonidas’ reason for staying at Thermopylae (‘great fame would come to him if he stayed there’, μένοντι δὲ αὐτοῦ κλέος μέγα ἐλείπετο: Hdt. 7.220.2), and is often said to be inspired by a Homeric ethos. It is certainly true that both Herodotus and his characters are inspired by Homer in their attitude to kleos, but by expressing his wish to preserve kleos in his preface and then showing such kleos to be a motivation for noble actions, Herodotus comes very close to expressing a didactic purpose which becomes explicit only in Hellenistic historiography.

MORALISING TECHNIQUES

Moralising in Narrative Pauses

Herodotus’ Histories is a colourful tapestry of varied stories, woven together in a way that brings out contrasts, similarities and variations. Guiding statements (‘transitional sentences’) at the beginning and end of each episode tell the reader how it fits together with the episodes surrounding it and let the alert reader find his or her way through the wild-growing logoi (although there is also pleasure in allowing oneself to get lost in them and forget the connections for a while). Such an alert reader will also find narratorial guidance of another sort, in the shape of moralising introductions, conclusions and concomitant statements that tell them how to read some of the varied episodes, in the same way as in the narratives of Polybius and Diodorus.

A recurring feature of Herodotus’ style is a minimalist type of ring-composition which bookends an episode or digression with similar statements. For instance, Herodotus introduces the story of how Gyges goes from being commander of the king’s bodyguard to becoming king with ‘Here is how the kingdom passed from the Heraclidae, who had been the Lydian royal family, to Croesus’ family, who were called the Mermnades’ (1.7.1), and
seven chapters later the story is rounded off by the very similar statement ‘That is how the Mermnadae deprived the Heraclidae of the rulership of Lydia and gained it for themselves’ (1.14.1).\textsuperscript{3} These statements sometimes carry a moral evaluation, such as ‘A short while later, however, retribution for Polycrates’ death caught up with Oroetes’ (3.126.1), introducing a story which a few chapters later is concluded with the very similar statement ‘And that is how retribution for the death of Polycrates of Samos caught up with Oroetes of Persia’ (3.128.5).\textsuperscript{4}

There are also numerous instances of introductory, concluding and concomitant moralising in the work which are not picked up by correlative statements, but work exactly like their Hellenistic counterparts. An example is this conclusion to the story of how Cyrus the Great becomes king of Persia:

\begin{quote}
Ἀστυάγης μὲν νῦν βασιλεύσας ἐπ’ ἑτα πέντε καὶ τριήκοντα οὖτω τῆς βασιλείας κατεπαύσθη, Μῆδοι δὲ ὑπέκυψαν Πέρσῃσι διὰ τὴν τούτου πικρότητα, ἄρξαντες τῆς ἄνω Ἅλυος ποταμοῦ Ἀσίης ἐπ’ ἑτα τριήκοντα καὶ ἑκατὸν δυῶν δέοντα, πάρεξ ἢ ὅσον οἱ Σκύθαι ἦρχον.
\end{quote}

In this way, Astyages was deposed from power having been king for thirty-five years, and the Medes came under the Persian yoke because of his harshness after having ruled Asia above the River Halys for 128 years (except for the time when the Scythians ruled). (Hdt. 1.130.1)

The story has ended with a defiant speech by the captive Astyages (1.129, in oratio obliqua) to the traitor Harpagus, which might well make a reader sympathetic to the fallen king. The moralising conclusion ensures a different response: although Astyages may have a point in chiding his former right-hand man, the passing of power from the Medes to the Persians is still primarily his fault because he wielded power too harshly.\textsuperscript{5}

Particular to Herodotus’ \textit{Histories} is the use of a moralising conclusion to present the narrator’s own view on an episode, custom or cause after a summary of one or more views held by internal characters or external groups of people. Examples are 2.64.2, where he expresses distaste at excuses offered by non-Greeks and non-Egyptians for having sex in temples, and 8.129.3, where he agrees with the Potidaeans that a tide that drowned Persian attackers was divine punishment for their desecration of a statue of Poseidon.

\textsuperscript{3} For a good discussion of these transitional sentences and their likely connection with oral story-telling see Lang (1984: 1–17).

\textsuperscript{4} Other examples of moralising bookending: 1.185.1 with 187.5 and 1.196.1 with 5.

\textsuperscript{5} Other examples of guiding moralising: 1.34.1, 1.197.1, 1.199.1, 2.119.2, 2.126.1, 3.75, 3.118.1, 4.164.4, 4.205, 5.124.1, 6.45.2, 6.72.1, 6.91.1, 6.138.4, 7.107.1, 8.13, 8.90.1, 8.106.4, 8.116.1, 9.37.2, 9.78.1.
Another Hellenistic type of moralising found in Herodotus is the moral digression. Herodotus is, of course, famed for his digressions, but most of them are of a different kind from the ones encountered in Polybius and Diodorus: most of Herodotus' digressions are narrative in the sense that they either (analeptically) narrate events that have led to an event or situation that forms part of his main narrative or (proleptically) narrate events that happen later than those of his main narrative, and which will result from them. Some of these narrative digressions are provoked by moral concerns, such as 8.105–6, which begins with the moralising introduction: ‘One of these Pedasians, Hermotimus, was the one to whom it happened to take the greatest revenge on someone who had wronged him of all the people we know of’ (ἐκ τούτων δὴ τῶν Πηδασέων ὁ Ἑρμότιμος ἦν τῷ μεγίστῃ τίσις ἣδη ἀδικηθέντι ἐγένετο πάντων τῶν ἡμεῖς ἴδομεν: 8.105.1). After the story of the crime and the revenge, which is told with enough evaluative phrasing to make sure the reader knows where his loyalties should lie (ἔργων ἀνοσιωτάτων: 8.105.2), the digression is rounded off with the moralising conclusion: ‘So this is how vengeance and Hermotimus caught up with Panionius’ (Πανιώνιον μὲν νὸν οὐτὸ περιήλθε ἢ τε τίσις καὶ Ἑρμότιμος [being picked up by a δὲ in the next sentence continuing the main storyline]: 8.106.4).

Occasionally, Herodotus’ digressions constitute pauses in his narrative rather than glimpses backwards and forwards in time, and most of these have a moral bearing. Some of them discuss the causes behind events in moral terms (e.g. 3.38, arguing that Cambyses’ ridiculing the religious customs of others must have been caused by madness), some offer moral evaluations of specific actions (e.g. 9.71 on the greatest courage shown at Plataea), some follow associatively from the main narrative (e.g. 5.78 on how democracy made the Athenians better fighters), and quite a few are included for reasons of polemic (e.g. 2.120 on the Trojan War as divine punishment for the violation of guest-friendship). All of these types of digressions – causal, evaluative, associative and polemical – are common in the Hellenistic historiographers, as we have seen. It is worth quoting a Herodotean moral digression in order to compare it with its Hellenistic counterpart:

εἰ μὲν νὸν Ἑρέξες τε ἀπέπεμψε ταῦτα λέγοντα κήρυκα ἐς Ἅργος καὶ Ἀργεῖων ἄγγελοι ἀναβάντες ἐς Σοῦσα ἐπειρώτων Ἀρτοξέρξεα περὶ φιλίης, οὐκ ἔχω ἄπροκεώς εἰπέν, οὐδὲ τινα γνώμην περὶ αὐτῶν ἀποφαίνομαι ἄλλην γε ἢ τὴν περ αὐτοὶ Ἀργεῖοι λέγουσι· [2] ἐπίσταμει δὲ τοσοῦτο ὅτι εἰ πάντες ἀνθρώποι τὰ οἰκῆμα κακὰ ἐς μέσον συνενείκαιεν ἀλλὰ ἔκεισαν ἀλλήλων μοι ἀλλίσσοιες,
Now, if Xerxes did send a herald who said this to Argos and messengers from the Argives went up to Susa and asked Artoxerxes about an alliance, I cannot say with certainty, but I am not announcing any other opinion about them than what the Argives themselves are saying. (2) I believe that if all human beings brought their own individual evils to market wanting to exchange them with their neighbours, when they had looked closely at their neighbours’ evils, each of them would gladly take back what he had brought himself. (3) And so what the Argives did was not the most shameful thing in the world. I for my part have a duty to say what I have heard, but I do not have a duty to trust all of it, and let this statement hold true for my entire work – considering that it is also said that it was the Argives who called the Persians into Greece, because the war with the Lacedaemonians was going badly and they wanted anything rather than their present grief. So much for the story of the Argives. (Hdt. 7.152–3.1)

This digression follows the Polybian schema: it is tied to its surrounding narrative by its first and last sentence, but in the middle strays quite far away from the circumstances that sparked it in order to generalise about human behaviour and offer programmatic comments on the writing of history. The digression is part historiographical comment on the unreliability of sources, part moral comment on events narrated. In other words, it is at the same time evaluative and polemical. Significantly, however, the moral point is not as straightforward as is mostly the case in Polybian and Diodoran digressions: it does not just comment on the events, but also encourages the reader to question his own way of making moral judgement by implying that some actions which seem inexcusable can, in effect, be excused if one knows the full circumstances. It is characteristic of Herodotus’ moral messages that they are complex and thought-provoking, as we shall see below.

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7 Whether Herodotus’ statement here is, in fact, meant as programmatic for the Histories as a whole or is only meant to apply to this instance has been much discussed, but is of little consequence for the present study. For discussions see Lateiner (1989: 79–83), Thomas (2000: 188 with n. 47, 214), Baragwanath (2008: 122–59).

8 Baragwanath (2008: 214–17) offers a brilliant analysis of Herodotus’ moral message in this passage (although she does not use that expression).
Moralising Integrated into the Narrative of Events

The most pervasive method of moralising within the narrative of events in the Hellenistic historiographers is evaluative phrasing. This practice is also found in Herodotus. It is used more sparingly than in Polybius and Diodorus; often the moral stance is signalled by just one epithet (οὐκ ὅσια: 3.16.2) or rhetorical technique, such as emphasis through negation (e.g. ‘not having consulted the Delphic Oracle about where they should go to found the colony, or having followed any of the traditional customs’: 5.42.2). Nevertheless, such expressions are an attempt at guiding the reader’s moral response to a narrated episode.

Another type of Hellenistic moralising used by Herodotus is to signal a moral world-order by the correlations between actions and results. Sometimes this is done through straight statements of causal connections, such as ‘the goddess afflicted the Scythians who plundered her temple in Ascalon and all their descendants forever with hermaphroditism’ (τοῖσι δὲ τῶν Σκυθέων συλήσασι τὸ ἱρὸν τὸ ἐν Ἀσκάλωνι καὶ τοῖσι τούτων αἰεὶ ἐκγόνοισι ἐνέσκηψε ὁ θεὸς θήλεαν νοῦσον: 1.105.4). More often, the connection is established obliquely, through the narrative, as in the Hellenistic historiographers. Thus the Spartan Dorieus’ colonisation attempt fails because he does not consult the Delphic Oracle (5.42, with emphasis through negation; see above), and Miltiades, victor of Marathon, dies from a wound received as he is trying to rob a Parian temple (6.134–6). The message propounded by these causal connections is by no means as

9 οὔτε τῷ ἐν Δελφοῖσι χρηστηρίῳ χρησάμενος ής ἡντινα γήν κτίσων ἵη, οὔτε ποιήσας οὔτοι τῶν νομιζόμενων.
10 Other examples of passages containing evaluative phrasing with a moral bearing:
11 Other examples of straight statements of causal connections with a moral bearing:
1.106 (Scythians toppled because of oppressive rule), 1.66.1 (prosperity makes the Spartans warlike), 2.128 (hailed kings are refused fame), 3.67 (Smerdis is generous and is loved), 4.149 (the children of the Spartan clan of the Ageidae always die young, until they build a temple), 4.152 (the Samians help the Cretan guide left behind by the colonisers of Thera, and this becomes the beginning of a strong friendship between the Samians and the Therans), 7.231 (Aristodemus is punished for cowardice).
12 Other examples: 5.83 (Athenians who try to carry off divine statues from Aegina are struck with madness and kill each other), 6.139–40 (the Pelasgians create their own oracle, which is later fulfilled), 6.66 (Cleomenes gets Cobon to bribe the Pythian priestess to deliver an oracle in his favour; Cobon and the priestess are found out and banished [and Cleomenes will suffer later]), 7.181 (Pytheas fights bravely and is honoured by his Persian captors), 7.223.3–4 (high Persian casualties because of whip-wielding by officers), 7.233 (the Thebans who go over to the Persians end badly; emphasis by negation).
uniform and easily decoded as the one established by similar means in Polybius’ *Histories* and Diodorus’ *Bibliotheke* (a problem we shall return to below), but the technique is certainly used.

Much more regularly than either of these types of moralising, Herodotus uses moralising vignettes, a technique widespread in both Polybius and Diodorus as well as apparently many of the now fragmentary Hellenistic histories. Herodotean vignettes are typically slightly longer than the ones found in Polybius and Diodorus, but they tend to follow the same pattern of scene-setting, the presence of often two and sometimes more characters, and direct or reported speech by at least one character. A good example is the negotiations between Aristagoras of Miletus and Cleomenes of Sparta, which are narrated over three chapters (5.49–51). It falls in two parts taking place at two different occasions over the space of three days. The first part consists of a brief scene-setting which introduces a map that Aristagoras has brought with him (5.49.1), followed by a speech by Aristagoras in *oratio recta* punctuated by the narratorial remark that ‘he said this pointing to the map’ (5.49.5), and ends with the information that Cleomenes asks for two days to think about Aristagoras’ proposal. The second part begins with a further scene-setting (5.50.1) and then combines indirect and direct speech in narrating a conversation between Aristagoras and Cleomenes, during which the distance from the Ionian coast to the palace of the Persian king becomes the reason why the Spartan rejects the proposal. Here, the narrator describes Aristagoras’ efforts to persuade Cleomenes as διαβάλλων, ‘intentionally misleading’ (5.50.2),\(^\text{13}\) the only evaluative word uttered in the narrator’s voice during the episode. Finally (5.51) the scene shifts to Cleomenes’ house, where Aristagoras follows him as a suppliant, and a third character is introduced: Cleomenes’ daughter Gorgo. The theme also shifts, from geography to money, as the narrator tells us that Aristagoras offers increasingly large bribes to Cleomenes until Gorgo speaks in *oratio recta*: ‘Father, the stranger will corrupt you if you do not remove yourself from his company’ (πάτερ, διαφθερέει σε ὁ ξέινος, ἦν μὴ ἁποστίς ἵς: 5.51.2). The vignette ends with Cleomenes ‘being pleased with his daughter’s advice’ (ἠσθεὶς τοῦ παιδίου τῇ παραινέσι: 5.51.3) and sending Aristagoras packing. There is no narratorial conclusion. The moral is unmistakable, though: Aristagoras was intentionally misleading Cleomenes and trying to corrupt him, and the Spartan king was only saved by his uncorrupted child – a girl, even, demonstrating Spartan peculiarity in gender roles. Gorgo’s moral authority is reinforced by her statement being in *oratio recta*, and by internal approval by the

\(^{13}\) For διαβάλλειν in Herodotus see Pelling (2007).
criticised character himself. The lack of narratorial conclusion is typical of moralising vignettes in Herodotus, as in many of those found in Diodorus.\(^{14}\)

Closely related to moralising vignettes are moralising speeches. There are a few of these in Herodotus’ *Histories*, and, as with speeches in the Hellenistic historiographers, their moral lessons have to be discerned from their reception by their internal audience, the degree to which their moral points concur with the narrative, and the degree of moral authority held by the speaker. Thus, the reader is brought to take the dying speech of Cambyses seriously (3.65) because both its moral stance and its narrative of past events correspond to those of the narrator, and because the speech itself acts as an evaluation of Cambyses’ actions by an internal authority, namely Cambyses himself, who has now, on his death-bed, ‘become sensible’ (ἐσωφρόνησε: 3.64.5). Written letters in the *Histories* function in the same way.\(^{15}\)

A particular kind of speech, which occurs in a particular kind of vignette in the *Histories*, is the speech of the wise adviser, also sometimes called the tragic warner, in the vignette of ruler and wise adviser.\(^{16}\) The first and programmatic such vignette is the encounter between Croesus and Solon in book 1 where Solon offers important moral advice (the details of which we shall return to below), which Croesus would have done well to heed. Later on, Croesus becomes the wise and equally ignored adviser first to Cyrus, then to Cambyses. In the last three books, the quintessential wise adviser is Artabanus, who repeatedly advises Xerxes, but to no avail. The common traits of these wise advisers are that (1) they argue their cases on a moral basis, (2) their advice is ignored, and (3) the neglect of their advice leads to disaster for the ruler. They function as moral authorities whose judgement the reader can trust and whose advice he might decide to follow in his own life as far as possible.

Moral judgements by internal authorities are widely used in Herodotus: Darius is judged greedy and, by implication, impious by an inscription in a tomb he opens (1.187); Persian popular wit designates Cyrus ‘father’, Cambyses ‘master’ and Darius ‘shopkeeper’ (3.89.3); and the Spartans


\(^{15}\) Other moralising speeches in Herodotus: 1.71, 1.206, 1.207, 5.92, 6.86, 6.109; letters: 1.212, 3.40.

\(^{16}\) The concept of the wise adviser in Herodotus was first explored by Lattimore (1939), who divides the stereotype into ‘the tragic warner’ and ‘the practical adviser’ and offers a long list of both types. In present-day Herodotus scholarship, however, it is the tragic-warner type that has become universally recognised, and which is most often called the ‘wise adviser’. For more recent discussions see Stahl (1975), Dewald (1985), Flory (1987), Pelling (1991), Shapiro (1994).
realise that the Athenians will become stronger than them by gaining democracy (5.91). The ultimate internal authority in the Histories is oracles, particularly the Delphic Oracle. When oracles predict punishment for an action (1.13) or command characters to atone for their actions, the reader has to understand that those actions were wrong – particularly as the atonement usually makes the unwanted consequences go away, thus proving them to have been brought on by the divine (e.g. 1.19 and 22).

The dominant type of moralising in Herodotus’ Histories, however, is one that is not found in either Polybius or Diodorus, namely moralising by means of patterning and repetition. The fact that there is a pattern in Herodotus according to which a rich and powerful man is brought low by unpredictable and sudden disaster has long been recognised. For the purposes of the present study it is important to note that wealth and power, that is, supreme good fortune, tend to make Herodotean characters arrogant and overconfident, and that this is part of what leads to their downfall. This connection between good fortune, arrogance and downfall/peripeteia points forward to some of the most dominant moralising themes in Polybius, Diodorus and the fragmentary Hellenistic historiographers, as we have seen in Part I.

Space restrictions prevent an overview of the variations of the pattern in all its instances throughout the Histories; the following offers an outline only, with references to further reading in the footnotes. The pattern is established in book 1, by the programmatic story of Croesus (Hdt. 1.26–56, 1.69–91 and 1.206–14). At the beginning of this story, Croesus believes himself to be the happiest man in the world and wants the wise man Solon to confirm this. Instead he gets a speech about the uncertainty of human life and the malicious jealousy of the divine, during which Solon famously declares that no one should be called happy before he has died, but only ‘favoured by fortune’ (πρὶν δ’ ἂν τελευτήσῃ, ἐπισχεῖν, μηδὲ καλέειν κω ὀλβιον ἄλλ’ ἐντυχέα: Hdt. 1.32). In the subsequent narrative Croesus first loses his only able-bodied son in a freak accident (1.35–44), then impiously tests the famous oracles (Hdt. 1.46–9), asks Delphi whether he should make war on Persia and receives misleading answers which lead him to go ahead, and finally loses his wealth and power – the two things that specifically marked him out, in his own mind, as happy (ὀλβιος) – and is taken captive by King Cyrus of Persia (Hdt. 1.86). Cyrus decides to burn Croesus alive, and on the lit pyre Croesus shouts out the name of Solon. This is a

17 Other examples of internal evaluation: 2.115, 3.30.1, 3.43, 3.64, 7.228.
18 Other examples of moral evaluations by oracles: 1.167, 1.174, 2.133, 5.114. For the narrative authority of the Delphic Oracle in Herodotus see Kindt (2006).
19 Major studies of this pattern are Immerwahr (1966), Fornara (1971), Lateiner (1989), Harrison (2000).
clear instance of judgement by internal authority and shows that we are meant to take Solon’s speech as a true insight: human life in the world of Herodotus’ Histories is, indeed, uncertain, and prosperity only temporary.

As the Histories progress, Croesus’ success and downfall are repeated, with variations, by each of the Persian kings: Cyrus is a good king in the beginning, but becomes overconfident and believes himself blessed by the gods (ἐμεῦ θεοὶ κήδονται καὶ μοι πάντα προδεικνύουσι τὰ ἐπιφερόμενα: 1.209.4), which leads to him attacking the Massagetae and losing his life. Cambyses is bad (and mad) from the outset and commits numerous acts of both impiety (3.16, 25, 29) and cruelty (3.14, 27, 31–3). He finally dies from a self-inflicted wound after discovering that he has killed his brother needlessly and lost his throne to an impostor (3.64). Darius is an acceptable king to begin with, but then becomes increasingly overconfident (4.83, 4.91) and cruel (4.84), leading up to his Scythian expedition, which ends in disaster (4.134–42). Finally, the biggest villain of them all, Xerxes, is led to invade Greece partly by his own ambition, partly by divine dreams playing on this ambition. He then commits transgressions and atrocities – from whipping the Hellespont (7.35) and being mistaken for Zeus (7.56) to cutting young men in half (7.39) and burying children alive (7.114) – and finally loses the war and his dignity (7.115–20). Other characters in the work display similar, albeit shorter, story arcs, such as the Egyptian king Apries (Hdt. 2.161–3 and 169) and Polycrates, tyrant of Samos (3.39–43 and 120–5). The lessons to be learned from this pattern are not uncomplicated, and we shall return to them below.

A type of moralising related to the repetition of a pattern is moralising by means of a narrative juxtaposition. This can be done within a passage, as in 8.99, which begins with a description of celebrations in Susa because of Xerxes’ capture of Athens, marking it the first half of a pair with μέν, and then narrates the arrival of the message about the defeat at Salamis and the Persian reaction to it in the corresponding δέ-clause. Most often, however,

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20 Waters (1971: 62–3 with n. 44) argues that, as Darius survives his Scythian adventure, he cannot be said to meet divine vengeance. Waters uses this as an argument against moralising and patterns in Herodotus. However, Herodotus portrays Darius’ escape from Scythia as a very close call and hints that complete disaster would have followed if the Ionians guarding the bridge had not remained loyal, or if Darius had not left Scythia in time (Hdt. 4.134–42). The fact that Darius does see reason and retreats before it is too late means that he, in contrast to Cyrus, is saved by his own realisation of the limits set to his power (thus Gould 1989: 105). It is also worth remembering that Herodotus was writing moral history, not fiction: the historical Darius did in fact escape from his Scythian adventure unscathed, so Herodotus could not very well let his narrative alter ego die on the campaign. He was, however, free to interpret Darius’ career as an example of arrogance and overconfidence checked at the last moment and of disaster being averted.

21 Baragwanath (2008: 242–53) offers a perceptive analysis of the interplay between the different factors influencing Xerxes’ decision-making.
the contrast is played out over longer stretches of narrative, and the reader has to make the comparison without hints such as μέν–δέ constructions. Thus, Spartan courage, steadfastness and fighting ability at Thermopylae are contrasted with Persian uselessness in 7.208–12, and, more subtly, the hunger and desperation of Xerxes’ army on their flight to the Hellespont after Salamis (8.115–20) contrast with the exaggerated and overconfident splendour of the same army when it reached the Hellespont at the outset of the expedition (7.44–56), heightened by the moralising vignette of the conversation between Xerxes and Artabanus about the fragility of human life and success at 7.45–52.

Importantly, however, none of this is ever uncomplicated. Herodotus shows very clearly that not even Xerxes is all bad and that his downfall was not simply due to his transgressions. It is now time to explore what messages it may be possible to extract from the patterns and their complications.

**MORAL LESSONS**

The overall lesson of the *Histories*, as has been hinted above, is one about the relationship between human beings and the divine forces that rule the world. We begin with the programmatic story of Croesus, the rich and powerful Lydian king who becomes a slave of Cyrus the Great. Such a spectacular *peripeteia* forcefully conveys the message that human life is in the hands of superhuman powers and therefore uncertain. For didactic purposes, the crucial question is whether Croesus could have done anything to avoid his fate, and, interestingly, the answer to this question seems deliberately to have been left ambiguous. In Solon’s speech there is no hint that human beings can influence their own fate. Human existence is ruled by τὸ θεῖον, τύχη and ὁ θεός, which appear to be either different aspects of the same force or different expressions for it.22 On the other hand, the narrator introduces the story of Croesus’ loss of his son by stating that ‘a big righteous retribution from the god (ἐκ θεοῦ νέμεσις μεγάλη) struck Croesus, as far as one can guess, because he thought himself to be the happiest of all men’ (1.34.1).23 This amounts to saying that if Croesus had lis-

22 Harrison (2000: 158–79) has a good discussion of these concepts in Herodotus and concludes that it is impossible to distinguish rigidly between them.

23 Waters (1971: 47) argues that Herodotus only introduced the idea of nemesis ‘to assist in presenting to his audience, mainly persons of little historical perceptiveness and obviously having no historical training at all, certain facts and features of the history he was recording’. To this it is necessary to ask (1) what ‘historical training’ did Herodotus himself have in an age before history was invented? And (2) if what he really meant was ‘some people say this was nemesis, but I do not believe in that’, why did he not write that when he elsewhere is not afraid to put forward unpopular ideas (e.g. 7.139)?
tended to Solon and learned humility, his son would not have been killed.\textsuperscript{24} However, when Cyrus has decided to spare Croesus and let him send to the Delphic Oracle to ask about its reasons for tricking him into invading Persia (1.90–1), it tells him that ‘the god’ was punishing him, not for his own arrogance, but for the misdemeanour of his ancestor Gyges. It also tells him that Apollo has postponed the destined disaster for three years, but that even the gods cannot alter fate (1.91.1–2).

Herodotus never attempts to explain the contradiction between these three different explanations for Croesus’ misfortune, and probably no logical explanation should be attempted: as Harrison has rightly and forcefully argued, contradictions are common in all belief systems.\textsuperscript{25} Moreover, important events in the \textit{Histories} are often overdetermined, that is, brought about by a number of different and sometimes logically mutually exclusive causes such as predetermination, divine vengeance and purely human motivations.\textsuperscript{26} This overdetermination does not make the story of Croesus devoid of a moral, it just makes the moral less clear-cut: Croesus suffers partly because human life is inherently uncertain and subject to the will of jealous and incomprehensible divine powers, partly because he does not stay moderate and humble in his success,\textsuperscript{27} partly because one of his ances-

\textsuperscript{24} It has been pointed out (by e.g. Shimron 1989: 35) that the narrator ascribes only the loss of Croesus’ son and not his further fate to superhuman punishment. This is strictly true, but the fact that the idea of divine vengeance has been expressed in connection with Croesus’ overconfidence makes it easy for the reader to keep it in mind in the narrative, which shows him not learning from the loss of his son.

\textsuperscript{25} Various explanations have been attempted by scholars trying to make logical sense of the story. Shimron (1989: 42–9) argues that Herodotus himself did not believe in the Pythia’s explanation (or, indeed, any of the oracles given to Croesus), basing his argument on the \textit{λέγεται} in 1.91.1. However, this \textit{λέγεται} is not a distancing device; it simply shows that the narrator (and Herodotus) was not present when the Pythia gave its answer, but later had it reported to him. What Herodotus personally believed and did not believe is impossible to know, but it is clear that his narrator persona holds an inconsistent religious belief, and we can therefore assume that such an inconsistency was acceptable to both Herodotus himself and his intended audience. See Harrison (2000: \textit{passim}) and Versnel (2011: 527–38).


\textsuperscript{27} Waters (1971: 3, 45–7) argues that our general impression of Croesus is of a good and ‘pious but foolish person’, and uses this to argue against the episode forming a pattern with the narrative of Polycrates. Gould (1989: 125) and Harrison (2000: 42–3) also argue that Croesus is supposed to be a good man. This positive attitude to Croesus may have been influenced by his role in earlier Greek poetry (cf. Georges 1994: 169–76), but I do not believe that it is to be found in the \textit{Histories}. Here Croesus is ‘the first to commit injustice against the Greeks’ (Hdt. 1.5), he is rude to Solon and loses his temper when he does not receive the answers he was hoping for, he shows arrogance in believing himself to be the happiest of all, and surely it is a sign of impiety to test the famous oracles before daring to trust them (see the words of the Croesus of the \textit{Cyropaedia} 7.2.17). It is a modern misconception that this shows positive ‘scientific research’ (Waters 1971: 45). Croesus only
tors committed regicide. Thus the main message of the story is descriptive and thought-directing: human life is uncertain because it is ruled by powers whose motives we cannot fathom. But from the realisation of this message it is a small step to interpreting it prescriptively: we should stay moderate and humble in our times of success because they may well change to disaster in the blink of an eye. By avoiding arrogance we show proper understanding of the way the world works and our place in it as mere mortals, and this makes us more likely to avoid the jealousy of the mysterious god(s) and thus more likely to continue to prosper.

The same is true for the downfalls of overconfident and abusive men in power throughout the *Histories*: these seem to be brought about partly as divine punishment for crimes committed in the arrogance that inevitably follows great wealth and power, partly because the downfalls are either fated or simply necessitated by the inherent uncertainty of human life. The narrator never provides an explicit interpretation. Outside of the stories that conform to this pattern, however, disasters are sometimes ascribed by the narrator to divine vengeance. Such vengeance can punish individuals for their own transgressions (e.g. sacrilege, 8.129) or for those of an ancestor (e.g. 1.13 and 1.91), and the narrator will sometimes express doubt over which exact action led to the punishment (e.g. 6.75–84.1) or over whether it was a case of divine vengeance at all (e.g. 3.33). In cases of doubt, a punishment that somehow mirrors the crime seems to be an indicator of divine involvement (e.g. Cambyses wounding himself ‘in the same place where he himself had previously struck the Egyptian god Apis’: 3.64), pointing forward to the fascination with mirroring or ironic punishment seen in Diodorus, Timaeus and Phylarchus. A revealing passage is 7.133, where the narrator declares that he ‘cannot say what misfortune happened to the Athenians’ because they had killed Persian envoys. It shows that he fully expects some punishment to have struck the men responsible but that he simply cannot put his finger on the exact events that fulfilled that function. In Sparta, he goes on to explain, the divine punishment struck the sons of two heralds who had been sent to Persia to pay with their lives for the Spartan transgression, but been pardoned by Xerxes; and this coincidence shows that it was indeed divine punishment (‘that it fell on the sons of the

becomes good, wise and pious from experiencing on his own body the truth of Solon’s words.

28 Other examples of divine punishment: 1.105, 1.167, 2.120, 2.133, 3.128.5, 4.205, 5.85, 6.72, 6.84.3, 6.91, 6.134–5 and 137, 6.139–40, 8.20, 8.105–6, 8.129, 9.64.

29 See also 7.137.

30 ὅ τι δὲ τοῖσι Ἀθηναίοισι ταῦτα ποιήσασι τοὺς κῆρυκας συνήσαικε ἀνεθέλητον γενέσθαι, οὐκ ἔχω εἰπαί τι, πλὴν ὃτι σφένοι ἤ χώρη καὶ ἢ πόλις ἐδηιώθη. ἀλλὰ τοῦτο ὡς διὰ ταύτην τὴν αἰτίην δοκέω γενέσθαι: Hdt. 7.133.
men who had gone up to the king because of the wrath . . . makes it clear to me that it was a divine event because of the wrath’, τὸ δὲ συμπεσεῖν ἐς τοὺς παιδας τῶν ἀνδρῶν τούτων τῶν ἀναβάντων πρὸς βασιλέα διὰ τὴν μῆνιν, . . . δῆλον ὑπὸ μοι ὅτι θεῖον ἐγένετο τὸ πρῆγμα ἐκ τῆς μήνης: 7.137).

Sometimes divine destruction of human lives is rather less straightforward than simple punishment. Occasionally, the gods seem to be upholding some sort of law, according to which there need to be equal amounts of good and bad fortune in the life of each human being. This seems to be the case with Polycrates, who famously tries to safeguard his good fortune by inflicting grief on himself by throwing away a precious ring, only to get it back by a freak accident and then suffer death and crucifixion (3.39–43 and 3.120–5). Although Polycrates has certainly done enough to deserve divine punishment – killing and exiling his brothers, committing piracy (3.39) – the fact that the superhuman forces feel compelled to give him back his ring before punishing him points to some sort of balance to be upheld.\(^{31}\) A similar mechanism seems at work for Ameinocles, who is only mentioned once in the Histories, in order for the narrator to state that he paid for his sudden wealth by losing his child (ἄλλος μὲν τᾶλα ὡς εὐτυχεῖν εὑρήμασι μέγα πλούσιος ἐγένετο· ἦν γὰρ ἔν τις καὶ τούτον ἄχαρις συμφορὴ λυπεύσα παιδοφόνος: 7.190). At other times the actions of the divine forces seem incomprehensible,\(^{32}\) such as at 7.12–19, where divine dreams bully Xerxes into invading Greece against his better judgment, and 9.93–4, where ‘the gods’ for no apparent reason send wolves against their own sacred flocks and then punish the town of Apollonia for punishing the sleeping shepherd. These divine actions are never explained. The reader is left with the impression that human life is uncertain because it is the subject of incomprehensible and ultimately unknowable superhuman forces whose motives can at best be guessed at.

Moreover, Herodotus’ gods are a lot readier to deal out death and suffering than long life and happiness. Very few cases of divine rewards are mentioned in the Histories apart from that of Cleobis and Biton, who are rewarded for an extraordinary display of filial piety with the dubious gift of instant death (1.31.1–3), and that of Croesus, having his dire fate post-

\(^{31}\) In this case the gods work through a human being, Oroetes. For a brilliant discussion of the function of the alternative explanations of his motives see Baragwanath (2008: 96–100). For a perceptive discussion of the Polycrates story which focuses on Polycrates’ transgressions rather than divine jealousy see van der Veen (1996: 6–22).

\(^{32}\) Shimron (1989) makes much of this and takes it to mean that Herodotus did not believe in oracles and miracles. I would still argue that we cannot know what Herodotus believed, but that his narrative shows repeated divine intervention, some of which happens to be incomprehensible by application of human logic.
poned for three years by Apollo (1.91.2–3).\textsuperscript{33} Even in books 6–9, the narrative of the Persian invasions of Greece, the gods’ siding with the Greeks seems to have more to do with the impieties and cruelties committed by the Persians than with a desire to reward the Greeks for good behaviour.\textsuperscript{34}

The overall didactic lesson of the \textit{Histories}, then, is not to feel too comfortable in success and not to let good fortune go to your head. This is strikingly similar to the dominant moral lesson of Polybius’ \textit{Histories} and one of the main lessons of Diodorus’ \textit{Bibliotheke}. In the works of these two Hellenistic authors, the lesson is often delivered in the context of a victorious general deciding how to treat the defeated and/or his captives. Such situations are also found in Herodotus. The most famous is the one between the victorious Cyrus and his captive Croesus, where Cyrus first tries to burn Croesus alive, but is then intrigued by Croesus’ calling out the name ‘Solon’ and decides to put out the flames (1.86). That this is the right decision and the one a reader should emulate is not stated explicitly, but signalled through various means. Firstly, the narrator expresses uncertainty about Cyrus’ motivation for burning Croesus and offers three different suggestions (sacrificial victim, votive offering or test of Croesus’ status with the gods: 1.86.2), demonstrating the strangeness and incomprehensibility of the decision. In contrast, when Cyrus then changes his mind and decides to spare Croesus, his motivation is expressed with complete certainty; now the narrator understands his reasoning (1.86.6; see below). Secondly, typically of this world of divine dominance and human powerlessness, it is, in fact, not Cyrus who spares Croesus in the end, but Apollo, who makes it rain to put out the fire that has become too strong for human beings to control. This act of divine intervention makes Cyrus – and with him the reader – realise that ‘Croesus was dear to the gods and a good man’, and, by implication, that it was wrong to maltreat him (1.87.2).\textsuperscript{35}

It is instructive to compare Cyrus’ reasons for not burning Croesus with the moralising statements we have seen in Hellenistic historiography:

καὶ τὸν Κῦρον ἀκούσαντα τὸν ἐρμηνέων τὸν Κροῖσος εἶπε, μεταγνόντα τε καὶ ἔννόσαντα ὅτι καὶ αὐτός ἄνθρωπος εἶναι ἄλλον ἄνθρωπον, γενόμενον εὐδαιμονὴν ὡς ἄλλον καὶ ἀνθρώπον ὡς ἄνθρωπος, ἐπιλεξάμενον καὶ τοὺς μετὰ Κροίσου.

When Cyrus had heard the explanation that Croesus gave, he changed his mind and realised that he himself was a human being and was about to burn

\textsuperscript{33} Other divine rewards: 2.141 (divine help is sent in the form of an army of mice), 2.181 (prayer to Aphrodite is answered).

\textsuperscript{34} Impieties and cruelties of the Persians: 7.32–3, 7.39, 7.53, 8.32–3, 8.35–9, 8.53.

\textsuperscript{35} The same points about this scene are made in more detail in Hau (2008: 123–5).
alive another human being, who had been his equal in good fortune. And fearing the punishment for this action and considering that nothing is safe in human life, he ordered the burning fire put out as quickly as possible and told both Croesus and those with him to come down. (Hdt. 1.86.6)

The stress on being human, as opposed to divine, is recognisable from Diodoran moralising on human ability/inability to handle good fortune, as are the idea that mistreating someone in one’s power may well bring down (divine) punishment (τίσις in Herodotus, τιμωρία in Diodorus), and the stress on the shared humanity of the victim and the perpetrator, signalled here by ‘who had been his equal in good fortune’, γενόμενον ἑωυτοῦ εὐδαιμονίῃ οὐκ ἐλάσσω. The uncertainty of human life and the risk that the victor may one day end up in the same situation as his captive, which are both also implied by this expression, are topoi in Polybius. Herodotus’ techniques to bring this message across are more subtle than those employed by the two Hellenistic historiographers, but the message is fundamentally the same.36

Apart from arrogant and immoderate behaviour in good fortune, Herodotean readers are taught to avoid impiety and cruelty. These two vices are often displayed together, most magnificently by Cambyses, son of Cyrus the Great. In the course of thirteen chapters he burns down a temple of Zeus and pushes his men so hard on a poorly planned desert crossing that they descend into cannibalism (3.25), kills Egyptian officials (3.28), whips Egyptian priests and tries to kill the sacred Apis bull (3.29), assassimates his own brother (3.30) and kills his sister-wife in anger (3.32), shoots dead a young boy to prove his sanity, buries prominent Persians alive (3.35) and makes fun of a cult statue of Hephaestus (3.37). During this narrative, Cambyses’ madness is repeatedly stressed (ἐμμανής: 3.25.2; ὑπομαργότερος: 3.29.1; οὐ φρενήρης: 3.30.1 and 3.35.4 ἐξεμάνη: 3.33.1 and 3.34.1) and his actions are labelled ‘crimes’ (ἀδίκημα: 3.30.1) and ‘evil deeds’ (τῶν κακῶν: 3.31.1). The narrative is rounded off with a moralising digression, which states that ridiculing religious and other customs is a sign of madness (3.38).37 When Cambyses dies in 3.64–6, the statement that his self-inflicted wound is said to be in ‘exactly the same place where he had previously struck Apis the Egyptian god’ implies that his death is brought about by divine forces as punishment for his actions, but the connection is never made explicitly. This is typical of Herodotus’ moralising: characters who

36 A similar moral of moderation in victory is propounded by 9.78–9, where Pausanias refuses to maltreat Mardonius’ dead body after his victory at Plataea, although here the contrast is between Greeks and barbarians rather than between human beings and immortal gods.

37 πανταχῇ ὦν μοι δῆλα ἔστι ὅτι ἐμὰνη μεγάλως ὁ Καμβύσης· οὐ γὰρ ἂν ἱροῖσι τε καὶ νομαίοις ἐπεχείρησε καταγιλάν: 3.38.1.
commit impiety in the *Histories* tend to come to grief, but the connection between the crime and the punishment is made clear at most through juxtaposition of action and result, as, for instance, in the narrative of Miltiades, who is injured in the attempt to plunder a sanctuary and later dies from gangrene.\(^{38}\) Interestingly, cruelty can also be interpreted as impiety, as in the fate of Pheretime, who has taken an exaggerated revenge on her son’s murderers (thus also transgressing the bounds of reciprocity) and is eaten alive by worms ‘as if the gods are displeased by [lit. jealous at] too strong vengeance by human beings’ (ὡς ἄρα ἀνθρώποις αἱ λίην ἵχθυραι τιμωρίαι πρὸς θεῶν ἐπίφθονοι γίνονται: 7.205). The impious deed does not have to be as spectacular as this, though: people who ignore oracles and bad omens, or misinterpret them, also fail in their projects and often come to sticky ends.\(^{39}\)

Correspondingly, piety is an important virtue in the *Histories*. Characters who follow the – correctly understood – advice of oracles fare well (3.153, 5.1, 5.114), and Pausanias’ steadfast waiting for favourable omens at the Battle of Plataea seems to earn the Greeks the support of the gods (9.61–2). Piety as recommended by Herodotus is not as straightforward as the piety propounded by Diodorus, however. It is complicated by the fact that the Herodotean gods can use trickery to get what they want, and that some clever human beings are occasionally able to manipulate the divine forces. Thus, the Cymeans ask the oracle at Branchidae what they should do about a suppliant who is putting them in danger. The oracle tells them to give him up. Suspicious of this answer, the Cymean Aristodicus goes to the oracle and manages to trick it into revealing its true intention: it gave them bad advice in order to bring them to destruction because they were even asking what to do with a suppliant. The Cymeans then hand over the hapless suppliant to a third party and avoid disaster (1.158–9). Similarly, King Sabacus of Egypt dreams that he should cut all the priests in half, but he believes that the dream has been sent in order to drive him to sacrilege, which the gods could then punish, so instead of obeying it he leaves Egypt and goes into exile, apparently avoiding the catastrophe (2.139). Aristodicus and Sabacus are thus rewarded for their sagacity by averting the looming disaster, and the narrative seems to encourage the reader to admire them.\(^{40}\) Apparently, blind obedience to the gods is not always the same as true piety.

\(^{38}\) That makes Cambyses (3.64–6), Miltiades (6.134–5) and Cleomenes (6.72–86) three Herodotean characters who die of wounds received in odd ways as a consequence of committing impiety. Other characters commit impious deeds and suffer, either in the same episode or later: 1.105, 1.183.10, 5.42, 6.66, 6.91–2.1, 6.96, 6.101.3.

\(^{39}\) E.g. 1.55–6, 5.42, 6.76. Croesus’ testing of the famous oracles is another instance of impiety (1.46–8).

\(^{40}\) Another example of clever human beings tricking the divine or getting away with reinterpretations of its will are the Athenians and Themistocles (7.139.6–143).
Alongside the unfathomable divine powers, another force rules the Herodotean world, more human, but no less powerful: the force of reciprocity. In its simplest form reciprocity means returning good for good and evil for evil (not necessarily proportionately), and in this form it is seen repeatedly in the *Histories*: from the tit-for-tat of the girl abductions in 1.1–4, via Darius’ Greek campaign occasioned by Atossa’s promise to the doctor who cured her breast cancer (3.133–4), to the proleptic statement about how the Spartans would later leave Decelea alone during the Peloponnesian War because the Deceleans had helped the Tyndaridae in mythical times (9.73), far-reaching political decisions in the *Histories* are made on the basis of personal or national reciprocity. On a smaller scale, characters in Herodotus’ world are generally punished for their evil deeds and often repaid or even rewarded for their good ones by their fellow-human beings. When reciprocity is breached, this earns harsh words from the narrator. The relationship between kings and their subjects is probably also to be considered on this model: kings who treat their subjects well win loyalty and posthumous fame; those who mistreat their subjects are deposed or at least defamed. This is not quite the iron law of power being secured by mild treatment of the ruled that we saw in Diodorus, but it is not a million miles away from it.

Beside the divine and reciprocity, a third force plays a part in the Herodotean universe, namely the mechanism that leads from wealth and/or possession of a fertile land to luxurious living and from there to degeneration, softness and cowardice. We meet it already in the Croesus story, where Croesus after his capture saves the Lydians from enslavement by turning them from a constant threat to their new Persian masters into a docile and unwarlike people by forcing them to wear luxurious clothing and spend their time playing music (1.155–7). In the narrative of the Persian Wars, the mechanism takes on explanatory force, as a moralising vignette presenting the exiled Spartan king Demaratus in conversation with

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41 Reciprocity in Herodotus has often been discussed; see e.g. Gould (1991) and Braund (1998) with references to earlier scholarship.

42 Other examples are 3.1, 3.49, 4.152, 5.82–9, 5.99, 5.102 and 105, 6.108.


44 See e.g. 3.120.1 (Oroetes committed a terrible crime by murdering Polycrates although he did not know him) and 6.87.1 (despite the fact that the Aeginetans still have not paid for a wrong they have done to Athens, they feel they are the injured party).

45 See e.g. 2.129 and 133, 2.161–2 and 169, 3.89.3.

46 See e.g. 1.130.1, 2.124 and 128.

Xerxes sets out a clear connection between Greek, and especially Spartan, poverty, freedom and courage in contrast with the luxury, slavery and cowardice of the Persians, thus offering a moralistic model for understanding the ultimate Greek victory (7.100–5). This causal connection is reinforced in the final chapter of the work, where, in an analeptic digression, Cyrus the Great advises his contemporary Persians against giving up their rugged lifestyle for a life in luxury. Combined with the reader’s knowledge, largely from the Histories itself, of the luxurious lifestyle enjoyed by fifth-century Persians and the fact that they lost the war, this ending carries both great irony and great explanatory force. The fact that some important Persians (and Greeks) in the Histories subvert the stereotype compels a reader to engage actively in the narrative and ask himself at any given point whether environmental determinism is at work or not. Thus it is not an easy, catch-all causal explanation, but one moral-didactic strand among several. Nevertheless, it is striking that it is a moral message which continues to live on in Hellenistic historiography as late as Posidonius.

There are no digressions in the Histories condemning any particular inter-human vice in a way parallel to the digression on impiety and mocking of religion we saw above. Cruelty is a staple feature of the behaviour of kings and tyrants of all nationalities, often emphasised by evaluative phraseology and not rarely punished by either divine or human forces (or a combination of the two: 8.106.4), but never discussed at length. Actions born out of greed occasionally earn a negative epithet or are presented negatively through moralising vignettes or internal evaluation, but do not occupy much thematic space. Likewise, inter-human virtues do not hold a big place in the Histories. Justice and courage are praised occasionally and are sometimes shown to lead to advantages. The reader can be in no doubt that these are virtues to strive for, and cruelty and greed vices to avoid, but their scattered appearances means that they simply cannot occupy the same amount of thematic space as the overarching message of humility in the face of the uncertainty of human life.

So, in terms of action-directing advice, what lessons might a reader learn from the Histories? In terms of positive recommendations of actions, the moral is vague and not foolproof: towards other human beings, one should return kindness for kindness and hurt for hurt; towards the gods, one

49 Moralising on cruelty in Herodotus: 2.119, 3.34.1, 3.147.2 and 149, 6.31–2, 6.91–2.1, 6.101.3, 6.63.3, 7.39, 8.106.4, 8.116.1.
50 Moralising on greed in Herodotus: 1.187, 2.126, 3.21, 5.51, 6.86, 8.112.
51 Moralising on justice in Herodotus: 1.96–8, 2.129 and 133, 4.106, 7.164.
should show piety by performing the correct sacrifices and consulting the oracles about important decisions – but apparently one has to be careful about the types of questions asked, and if the answer seems unethical, one may well be better off not following the advice. The message is clearer on what actions to avoid: impiety towards the gods along with cruelty, greed and dependence on luxury in the human sphere; but above all one should avoid arrogance and complacent overconfidence when things go well. Keeping a humble and moderate state of mind should help one to treat mortals and immortals alike with the respect they deserve and is also the best guard against the uncertainty of life. Because the ways of the superhuman powers that rule the world are ultimately unknowable by human beings, the risk of superhumanly imposed disaster can never be nullified, but it can be reduced if one stays moderate in all things.

**SUMMARY OF RESULTS**

We can conclude that Herodotus does indeed moralise. We see forerunners of the Hellenistic techniques of guiding and digressive moralising as well as of the more subtle types of evaluative phrasing, vignettes, speeches and internal evaluation. Over and above these types of moralising, we have seen that Herodotus conveys a moral message by the forceful means of patterning and repetition. It is this macro-level moralising that gives the *Histories* its structure and makes it feel like a coherent whole despite the multiplicity of stories and characters. Without it, the *Histories* would be not just unintelligible, but meaningless. Immerwahr, in his famous study of the structure of Herodotus’ *Histories*, once stated that ‘the study of structure has the effect of isolating the purely historiographical aspects of the work, together with their philosophical foundations . . . it is significant that moral, religious, and anthropological ideas appear chiefly in the internal structure of individual *logoi*, whose external structure reveals the pattern of history’. I would argue that such a separation is impossible: the structural patterns which Immerwahr identify as ‘purely historiographical’ are, in fact, moral. The fact that morality is used in a causal manner to explain historical events such as the rise and fall of kings shows that Herodotus is writing Moral History, not, say, Economic History, or Environmental History. Moral didacticism forms the backbone of the work.

It is not only many of the moralising techniques that are recognisable from Hellenistic historiography; most of the moral lessons are too: every work of history we have looked at so far condemns cruelty, impiety and greed and points to a correlation between the way a ruler treats his subjects

53 Immerwahr (1966: 308).
and the success of his rule. The overarching message of Herodotus, that one should stay humble in success, is also a prominent message in Polybius and Diodorus. There are two important differences, though, between the moral messages of the Hellenistic historiographers and those of Herodotus. Firstly, Herodotus’ message is much more ambiguous: for every clear-cut message (‘one should obey the gods’, ‘greed is bad’) there seems to be a counter-message (‘but sometimes the gods are trying to mislead you’, ‘sometimes people get away with it’), even if less strong. Things in Herodotus are never clear-cut, and this leads to the second important difference: Herodotus’ advice on how to behave in the world is necessarily vague. The *Histories* is not a handbook, for statesmen or anyone else; it shows how the world works (according to Herodotus) and tries to endow its reader with the mind-set necessary in order to cope with it.