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K. Scarlett Kingsley, *Herodotus and the Presocratics. Inquiry and Intellectual Culture in the Fifth Century BCE*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2024, pp. xii+258

The fifth century BCE was an exceptionally vibrant period from a cultural standpoint, marked by intellectual experimentation and by the emergence of various disciplines that were only beginning to take shape within an environment of great fluidity. Among these, history — that is, the literary genre which would later come to be known as such — certainly deserves a place of prominence, thanks first to Herodotus and then to Thucydides. Precedents did exist (and the Greeks, always eager to identify a *protos heurtes*, had promptly pointed them out), but it would be reductive to imagine Herodotus (and later Thucydides) as establishing the conceptual coordinates of the historical discipline merely in dialogue with those earlier texts (Hecataeus and the logographers, or Homer). What makes their intellectual undertakings so compelling is precisely the opposite: their ability to engage in dialogue with nearly all the other main participants in contemporary Athenian (or more broadly Greek) debates. ‘There was no Herodotus before Herodotus,’ Momigliano famously observed, emphasizing the uniqueness of his work. This is true, but it does not justify the approach of those who persist in reading him in ‘splendid isolation’, as though he were simply the founder of a new genre destined for great success. The Herodotean *historiē* is also a product — one among many — of the intellectual culture of the fifth century. Herodotus’ reflections are constantly nourished by confrontation with his contemporaries (in a context, it hardly needs saying, marked by a strong spirit of competition). And a special place must be granted to those whom we are accustomed today to group under the label of (Presocratic) philosophers, whether the *physiologoi* of Aristotelian memory or the *sophistai* who held sway over much of Greece, particularly in Athens. After all, *historiē* at the time was a term associated with philosophical speculation (see pp. 16–18), whereas *philosophia* would only become a technical term later, in the fourth century BCE: ‘no one is a “historian”, but nor do intellectuals yet define themselves as “philosophers” either’ (p. 27; one might add that ‘Presocratic’ is a far more ambiguous term than the author assumes, p. 30). Herodotus’ historiography ‘competes with philosophy for authority in the field of Greek *paideia*, [...] but this competition is itself partly determined by a shared discursive framework’ (p. 35). Demonstrating the intensity and significance of this exchange with a view to a deeper understanding of Herodotus’ text is the (successful) aim of Scarlett Kingsley’s study.

More concretely, the book focuses on a number of specific issues, ranging from relativism (of which Herodotus is wrongly considered a proponent without qualification) to reflections on *nomos*, ethics, and self-interest; further topics include the meaning of *physis* (which plays a prominent role in his work on several levels, not only environmental but also anthropological) and the epistemological status of his project (what kind of authority does Herodotus claim for himself?). This problem-oriented approach is far more stimulating (and fruitful) than the

attempt to trace Herodotus' philosophical sources, which—as was common practice at the time—he rarely cites (a partial exception is the final chapter, devoted to a detailed comparison with the *Dissoi Logoi*, though it proves less illuminating than the preceding ones).

Two of the main themes addressed in the book concern the concepts of *nomos* and *physis* (and their possible interaction). Without doubt, *nomos* plays a pivotal role in the *Histories*, and famous passages such as the one on funerary customs (III 38) have often been used to legitimise the image of a relativist Herodotus who respects all *nomoi* regardless of their origin. This image, however, is far too simplistic, for other passages show that Herodotus is also aware of the limits of this concept and is willing to question its purported normative value: it is not true that Herodotus never questions the obligations imposed by *nomos*. The episodes involving Cambyses rather demonstrate that *nomos*, by virtue of its relativistic character, can become a tyrannical instrument, in opposition to popular morality (*ethea*) and even justice. The analysis of Cambyses' madness introduces an important qualification: the social body, not the individual, is the arbiter of *nomos* (see Otanes in III 80.3). But this position, promising as it is, eludes another important problem, relating *nomos* and imperialism, as testified by Xerxes's speech at VII 8 – a speech which is remarkably echoed in the words of Thucydides' Athenians at Melos (Thuc. V 105, cf pp. 81–89; equally fascinating, for a Thucydidean reader is the emphasis on the Persians as those who are always moving forward: this is the main characteristic of the Athenians in Thucydides). These are noteworthy positions, both negatively and positively: they show that Herodotus' historical narrative is prepared to engage critically with the ethical implications of relativism, and they find numerous parallels in the sophistic debates of the same period. From Protagoras to Thrasymachus and Antiphon, the question under discussion is precisely that of a legitimate foundation for *nomos* within a pluralistic or relativistic framework. Insofar as he is likewise interested in exploring *nomos* as a contested concept, Herodotus clearly belongs to the community of fifth-century thinkers examining the force of conventional versus objective ethics. As is well known, the debate—among sophists and others—gradually shifted its focus to another related issue: that of interest or advantage. This could serve as a criterion for the legitimate grounding of *nomos*. Such is Protagoras' thesis, for instance: *nomimon* is that which safeguards the political body. This is an interesting position, but also a debatable one when the safeguarding of collective interest entails harm to an individual (this is Antiphon's objection, cf. 87B44 D.K.). Darius' stance is no different when he emphasises the importance of *kerdos*, gain (see, for instance, pp. 108–113 on the constitutional debate in Book III). In short, Persia is not so distant from Athens in Herodotus' (montesquieian) account.

The term perhaps most closely associated with the Presocratics, *physis*, is likewise frequent in Herodotus. In the *Histories*, the analysis of *physis* serves to underscore the existence of regular patterns in the natural world; consequently, it also acquires predictive value for the study of the past. Most interestingly, *physis* is also employed as a conceptual tool for exploring the human

being and their relationship with the environment. The investigation of human nature likewise provides the reader with recurring patterns (a strong parallel with Thucydides' analysis of Corcyra, p. 140). Contrary to what one might presume, however, Herodotus—despite his emphasis on these regular patterns—is not a strict environmental determinist: 'environmental factors shape human culture, but it is less clear how they impact man's constitution' (p. 139). This is particularly significant when viewed within the coordinates of the debate concerning the reasons for the Hellenic victory over the Persians. A widespread position appealed to *physis* as the conceptual category through which to explain Greek superiority; Herodotus is famously often associated with the opposite view, which holds that it is rather *nomos* that accounts for their victory, as Demaratus explains to Xerxes (VII 104). This interpretation is correct only if we avoid the conventional dichotomy that aligns *physis* with necessity and *nomos* with freedom. For both Demaratus and Xerxes agree on the limits of human nature (dominated by fear) and disagree only on how best to master it: Spartan custom is 'a force of even greater compulsion' than Persian monarchy (p. 149). In other words, the debate is not between Spartan *nomos* and Persian *physis*. In fact, there is no antithesis between *physis* and *nomos*. What is truly at issue is how to control—and possibly enhance—human nature. Once again, an image emerges of Herodotus not only fully at ease within the debates of his time, but also capable of innovation from within tradition.

These are only a few examples (the analysis of the epistemic authority Herodotus claims for himself is also particularly noteworthy — on that point I refer the reader to my discussion *Herodotus on the limits of knowledge and authority*, 'Syllogos' 5 [2026]). But they illustrate clearly the value of a comparative study of Herodotus and the Presocratic philosophers. A criticism often levelled at Herodotus, ever since a well-known essay by W. Nestle in 1908, is that of *naïveté*, as though he still lived under the constraints of an archaic worldview. That this is — to say the least — a partial understanding of the *Histories* is the book's most persuasive conclusion, one that opens new avenues of research for all those interested in the intellectual world of the fifth century — a world that has been the subject of countless studies and yet continues to astonish by its vitality.

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