

### Are Herodotus' digressions in Book 1 'irrelevant'?

What is meant by the term 'digression'? A digression is a 'temporary departure from the main subject' (Stevenson 2010: 462). The meaning of 'irrelevant' would then mean something that was 'not connected with' (Stevenson 2010: 432) any of Herodotus' stated aims; that they do not add anything material to the *Histories*. So let us examine Herodotus' own aims which he sets out for his inquiry, 'ὡς μήτε τὰ γενόμενα ἐξ ἀνθρώπων τῷ χρόνῳ ἐξίτηλα γένηται, μήτε ἔργα μεγάλα τε καὶ θωμαστά' and 'τὰ μὲν Ἕλλησι τὰ δὲ βαρβάροισι ἀποδεχθέντα, ἀκλεᾶ γένηται, τὰ τε ἄλλα καὶ δι' ἣν αἰτίην ἐπολέμησαν ἀλλήλοισι' (1.1). We can see that he is reasonably clear, in his own mind, what he is setting out to do. Although Herodotus states three aims, the majority of scholars argue that the principle aim of Herodotus is 'the 'cause[s]' of the conflict between the Greeks and barbarians' (Bakker 2006: 92). Therefore, by examining the difference between our modern idea of factual history and new work of Herodotus to document contemporary events, this essay will, through examples which are by no means exhaustive and which are used to further the conclusion that digressions are entirely relevant to the endeavour of Herodotus.

When examining potential digressions, it is necessary to bear in mind that Herodotus 'did not observe the phenomenon which we call 'history' today.' (Meier 1987: 43). This is because 'history itself as we understand it did not yet exist' (Meier 1987: 43). Consequently, Herodotus and his digressions should not be judged by what we, a modern audience, expect from history; which is the concise narrative of events and causes that explains the 'process of change' (Meier 1987: 43). This can be explained by the fact that Herodotus did not use a purely historical model in order to tell his story. Griffiths argues that, 'the model whose influence suffuses his work at every level: [are] the Homeric poems' and observes that both poems, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* can be seen throughout Herodotus' work (2006: 135). The *Odyssey*'s influence can be seen in the way in which Herodotus 'in the first four ethnically- orientated books he casts himself in the role of Odysseus who 'saw the cities of many peoples and got to know their mentality (*Od.* 1.3)' (Griffiths 2006: 135). Iliadic influence is seen in the proem when the word 'ἀκλεᾶ' is used; 'kleos' is a very Homeric term and 'recalls one of the central preoccupations of the *Iliad*' (Griffith 2006: 135).

Although Herodotus' model was arguably epic it is wrong to infer that Herodotus was merely writing epic prose because he is not writing the remit of modern history. As Hartog convincingly suggests that, 'from its very first sentence Herodotus' historiographical operation presents itself as carving out a new form of knowledge and practice, as designating the name of a new *locus*;

*historiê*' (1992: 84). Nevertheless, his writing had its foundation in an epic model. In terms of digressions, it means that Herodotus' structure was 'based on a generous expansion of a simple-plot core by the addition of supplementary material; the use of ring composition which eases the incorporation of digressive material by allowing a graceful exit from and re-entrance into the main narrative flow' (Griffiths 2006: 135). This is supported by Waters who argues that, 'Homeric similes frequently became digressions by elaborating the picture far beyond the initial point of comparison' (1985: 51). De Jong also makes the pertinent point that Herodotus 'like Homer...restricted the timespan of his main story, but has included a much larger period in the form of anachronies; analepses...and prolepses' (2002: 253). Thus we can see how digressions are incorporated into the narrative structure of his work using the model of Homer, 'to give necessary or important background or supplementary information' (Marincola 2006: 13).

Digressions are therefore incorporated into the narrative flow, but the fact remains, as de Jong observes, while explaining one of the main criticisms of Jacoby, that although Herodotus declares his main theme to be the cause of the war between Persians and Greeks, 'this subject is virtually absent in the first four books, which deal almost exclusively with the confrontation between Persians and other barbarians' (2002: 246). On the other hand, Herodotus immediately starts Book One with a version of why the conflict happened, 'Περσέων μὲν νῦν οἱ λόγοι Φοίνικας αἰτίους φασὶ γενέσθαι τῆς διαφορῆς' (1.1). Although this is not the Greek version of events, it still presents a view as to why the hostilities began. As Hartog persuasively points out, 'they [the Persians] bring together several notorious tales introducing feminine characters for the purpose of weaving a continuous narrative from the origins of the hostilities between Greeks and barbarians...they instill order and create continuity: in short they perform their task as historians' (1992: 86) and so we must infer Herodotus is performing his task as a historian.

Through these stories, 'radically recast' (Griffiths 2006: 131) we have some semblance of understanding on the origins of the wars. To illustrate this, when Herodotus identifies Croesus in 1.6, as the one who 'set the long series of hostilities in motion' this is not immediately followed by the story of Croesus, as might happen in a modern historical narrative, but 'Herodotus reverts to flashbacks about his ancestor Gyges' (Griffiths 2006: 131). This may seem like a digression, but 'it gravitates inexorably to Croesus, the goal in whose direction it was first presented. And when that goal is reached (1.26...) we understand Croesus' position in history better than he does himself' (Bakker 2006: 98). Thus the apparent digressions at the start can actually 'shown to be precisely calculated' (Rösler 2002: 83).

There are, however, some stories that may be termed as true digressions. One such story is the story of Arion in 1.23. The chapter starts off rather randomly, using Periander as the only real link from the preceding narrative, 'Περιάνδρος δὲ ἦν Κυψέλου παῖς οὗτος ὁ τῷ Θρασυβούλῳ τὸ χρηστήριον μὴνύσας: ἐτυράννευε δὲ ὁ Περιάνδρος Κορίνθου: τῷ δὴ λέγουσι Κορίνθιοι (ὁμολογέουσι δὲ σφι Λέσβιοι) ἐν τῷ βίῳ θῶμα μέγιστον παραστῆναι' (1.23). The random element is emphasised by the line, 'τῷ δὴ λέγουσι Κορίνθιοι (ὁμολογέουσι δὲ σφι Λέσβιοι) ἐν τῷ βίῳ θῶμα μέγιστον παραστῆναι', it seems a somewhat forced way to begin the story. As Griffiths argues, Periander himself only came into the narrative 'rather obliquely' and the story seems to be without 'even a token semblance of proper motivation' (2006: 131). Stories such as that of Arion may also be why (as Bartky notes) that, 'Aristotle [in the *Poetics*] appears to suppose both that Herodotus recounts past events with no real sense of the whole picture of which those events are merely parts and that Herodotus views past events with no regard for the future', which is in contrast to poetry (2002: 445- 446).

Many scholars have, nevertheless, argued that this apparent 'digression' is in fact very relevant to the main themes of the *Histories*. Hooker, for instance, emphasises the significant word, 'θῶμα' (wonder, marvel) in the story of Arion, which exemplifies that, 'it was part of the writer's task to comment on the presence or absence of remarkable features' (1989: 145). This can be seen in Herodotus' proem when he says he will discuss 'ἔργα μεγάλα τε καὶ θωμαστά' (1.1). Hooker goes on to say that, 'wondrous things (θωμαστά) in Herodotus are part of a much larger, divinely-ordered pattern' (1989: 146). The significance of 'θῶμα' is supported by Hartog who says that, 'digressions may be a way of expressing *thōma*' (1988: 234), which illustrates one purpose of an apparent digression. Gray suggests that the apparently tenuous link between Arion and Periander is in keeping with the previous story about Alyattes' siege, because both contain the theme of investigation and identity. 'His [Periander's] investigation of Arion's story is parallel to his 'finding out' and relaying to Thrasybullus the information that allows him to deceive Alyattes into giving up the siege' (2002: 307). This is plausible when reading the Greek, 'Περιάνδρον τὸν Κυψέλου...πυθόμενον τὸ χρηστήριον τὸ τῷ Ἀλυάττη γερόμενον, πέμψαντα ἄγγελον κατειπεῖν, ὅπως ἂν τι προειδῶς πρὸς τὸ παρεὸν βουλευῆται' (1.20) which illustrates the theme of knowing and finding out, especially in the last sentence; 'ὅπως ἂν τι προειδῶς πρὸς τὸ παρεὸν βουλευῆται'.

Gray also observes a link between Arion and Croesus. Both please the gods through their gifts and are thus saved: 'Arion performs a song which pleases his god and is similarly rescued through the divine agency of the dolphin' and Croesus 'shouts out an appeal to Apollo...and is rescued...through the agency of Apollo's rain-storm because he had pleased the god with his gifts (1.87)' (2002: 307).

Although this appears convincing, the Greek itself in the Arion story does not actually mention a god, 'τὸν δὲ δελφῖνα λέγουσι ὑπολαβόντα ἐξενεῖκαι ἐπὶ Ταίναρον' (1. 24), although the Croesus story is more explicit 'ἐπιβώσασθαι τὸν Ἀπόλλωνα ἐπικαλεόμενον, εἴ τί οἱ κεχαρισμένον ἐξ αὐτοῦ ἐδωρήθη' (1. 87). This argument is sustainable because we can see that there are links between the stories. Consequently, although some stories (digressions) may appear to have been placed at random and irrelevant to the main themes of the book, they are being used to highlight principle tropes. As Griffiths is convincing when he postulates, 'we may speculate that it was important to Herodotus to introduce a tale about divine justice at the earliest possible moment, in order to put down a programmatic marker for the course of the whole Inquiry' (2006: 141).

Another story, that between Croesus and Solon, might also be seen as a digression because 'it does not fit into the chronological scheme which has been built up by many post-Herodotean authorities, both ancient and modern' (Markianos 1974: 9). The story is fictitious, which favours interpretation as a digression because it is not a historical event in the inquiry about the causes of the war between the Greeks and barbarians, therefore irrelevant to the main narrative. However, the Solon and Croesus story is 'programmatic...providing a philosophical framework for the *Histories* as a whole' (Shapiro 1996: 348). In fact, this digression is extremely relevant to the rest of the *Histories* because it is integral to the conceptual narrative of the principle cause of the wars between Greeks and Persians: Croesus himself.

Major themes are mentioned throughout Solon's speech to Croesus for example, in 1.32 he uses the analogy of a country, 'ὥσπερ χωρῆ οὐδεμία καταρκέει πάντα ἐωυτῆ παρέχουσα, ἀλλὰ ἄλλο μὲν ἔχει ἑτέρου δὲ ἐπιδέεται: ἢ δὲ ἂν τὰ πλεῖστα ἔχη, αὕτη ἀρίστη'. This is significant as Shapiro points out that, 'Herodotus makes a similar connection at the beginning of the *Histories*, stating that he will discuss small cities as well as great ones (1.5.4)' (Shapiro 1996: 356). Therefore, 'because human happiness is so transitory, Herodotus will discuss the small cities (many of which were once or may some day become great) as well as the ones that were great in his time. Thus the idea of the mutability of human fortune is prominently presented by Herodotus, in his own voice, at the outset of the *Histories*' (Shapiro 1996: 356) which demonstrates how relevant this digression is for the *Histories* and how Herodotus uses them.

Furthermore, the relevance of this particular 'digression' is illustrated by the consequence of, as Shapiro notes, ignoring the advice of Solon 'a nemesis from god took Croesus because he thought he was the happiest of all men (1.34.1)' and so 'it...initiate[s] a series of events which leads directly to his downfall' (1996: 352). This illustrates the fact that a meeting between Solon and Croesus

was necessary to provide context for the rest of the story. It is also 'setting forth basic assumptions about the nature of human life and its relation to the gods which could then provide a philosophical framework for the *Histories* as a whole' especially as it is near the start of the work (Shapiro 1996: 362). The philosophical element is characterised by the type of happiness described by Herodotus as 'εὐδαιμονίης' (1.32), which carries a very philosophical evocation. Pelling alludes to the importance of this word as he points out how it is used in 1.5, 'τὴν ἀνθρωπίνην ὧν ἐπιστάμενος εὐδαιμονίην', as both Herodotus and Solon through their travels have 'tried to impart, a temporal lesson about human prosperity and vulnerability' (2006: 146). Pelling argues further that this episode could also be showing us how Herodotus felt about his own job as a historian, it shows 'the limitations that attend any project of grasping and communicating insight, the limitations within which Herodotus' own text and readers, no less than his characters, have to operate' (2006: 146). This convincingly illustrates the relevance of the digression and the importance that some digressions have. Gray argues more generally about what she calls 'short stories', many of which 'seem to interact with other parts of the work' (2002: 292). This demonstrates the relevance of digressions as a whole as they are there to complement other stories.

Other digressions that may not at first seem relevant to the main story include the 'historical digressions on Athens and Sparta' (Waters 1985: 47). These start in 1.56 when Croesus needs to know who were the most powerful players among the Greek cities, 'μετὰ δὲ ταῦτα ἐφρόντιζε ἱστορέων τοὺς ἂν Ἑλλήνων δυνατωτάτους ἔοντας προσκλήσαιο φίλους' (1.56). As Waters asserts, 'the peg on which these two excursions hang is the convenient one of an appeal by Kroesus' (1985: 48). However, although this digression may have a convenient entry, it does not mean that it is irrelevant to Book One and Herodotus' aims. Waters convincingly continues 'these two states undoubtedly played a leading role in the successful resistance of Greece to the attempted Persian conquest, and it is therefore of vital interest to know how they came to be the leading cities of Greece' (1985: 47). This digression also 'herald[s] Croesus' aggression against Cyrus' (Gray 2002: 304). Subsequent discussion by Herodotus to discuss the Dorians illustrate de Jong's suggestion that many digressions 'are placed in a temporal perspective, the past and future illuminating the present' (2002: 253-4), 'εἰ δὲ χρεόν ἐστι τεκμαιρόμενον λέγειν τοῖσι νῦν ἔτι ἐοῦσι Πελασγῶν τῶν ὑπὲρ Τυρσηνῶν Κρηστῶνα πόλιν οἰκεόντων, οἱ ὄμουροι κοτὲ ἦσαν τοῖσι νῦν Δωριεῦσι καλεομένοισι (οἴκειον δὲ τῆνικαῦτα γῆν τὴν νῦν Θεσσαλιῶτιν καλεομένην)' (1.57).

Griffiths argues that this shows that Herodotus is establishing 'his composite picture by choosing a single fundamental line (East *versus* West), and subordinating the other strands which he will need to introduce; the latter are then cut up and spliced into the main thread at carefully chosen points'

(2006: 134). Hence Herodotus enables the reader to gain background information which is relevant to the narrative. Griffiths further argues that, 'it is natural for the author to supply relevant background information' (2006: 133). Wood also makes a compelling argument about why Herodotus diverts to a digression about Athens and the tyranny to which it is subject; 'it is the tyranny that is responsible for Athens' weakness' and the reason this is relevant to the narrative is because 'certain features in the account of the tyranny of the Pisistratidae parallel that of other great and oppressive dynasties' (1972: 42-3). Wood continues 'one of the two great states in Greece is enslaved, like the countries under the Lydian, then Persian sway' (1972: 44). As a consequence the reader finds a comparison between Greece and Persia and sees 'this complex of beginning, power, freedom and law, and the roots of injustice...[which] is one of the main formal...preoccupations of our author' (1972: 46). Herodotus invites another comparison, contrasting Sparta and Athens; Athens was subject to tyranny whereas Sparta was not, 'μὲν μεταβαλόντες εὐνομήθησαν' (1.66).

It is then notable, as Waters points out, that both Athens and Sparta 'disappear from the scene' after their respective descriptions, 'the latter totally until Book Five is reached, the former achieving a couple of purely incidental mentions on the way to the same temporal conjecture- half a century later' (Waters 1985: 48). This is, Waters argues, a 'feature of Herodotus' compositional method' (1985: 49), so once again we can find a reason for most Herodotean digressions. Moreover reason for a digression can be discerned because Herodotus often, 'repeats the words with which he began' for which de Jong find examples of 1. 59, 'τούτων δὴ ὧν τῶν ἐθνέων τὸ μὲν Ἀττικὸν κατεχόμενον τε καὶ διεσπασμένον ἐπυνθάνετο ὁ Κροῖσος' and in 1.65; 'τοὺς μὲν νυν Ἀθηναίους τοιαῦτα τὸν χρόνον τοῦτον ἐπυνθάνετο ὁ Κροῖσος' (de Jong 2002: 260). The phrase 'ἐπυνθάνετο ὁ Κροῖσος' is repeated in both sections.

Consequently, digressions in Herodotus should not be seen as irrelevant. Many apparent digressions enrich the story and describe wider themes. As Marincola argues, 'there is a direct line drawn from the opening figure of Croesus, the first man to conquer the Greeks, to the final battle of Mycale, the last historical incident in Herodotus' work' (2006: 17). Although some digressions may at first sight seem irrelevant, when they are examined it is possible to comprehend the deeper meaning. This was illustrated by the Arion story and the digressions on Athens and Sparta, which appear to digress from the main narrative. For instance, in the digression about Athens and Sparta, Croesus is not mentioned for twelve chapters, even though Croesus leads the narrative at that point. Herodotus was creating a story with context and meaning to a contemporary audience, not writing modern history. His model was the distinctly unhistorical Homeric epic tradition, but it is important to remember that Herodotus is not writing a mythological epic. Rösler makes the interesting point that Herodotus

includes digressions as part of his 'calculated structure', is because 'if one considers the date and goals of Herodotus' composition...then omitting any piece of it [information] meant consigning it to oblivion...in this way he incorporates the mass of additional material which he possessed' (2002: 83). By this argument no digression is irrelevant because all are necessary to allow Herodotus to include all the information he has.

Meier argues what Herodotus has created a 'multi-subjective, contingency-oriented account' (1987: 44), which includes digressions. The Homeric model is central, because through it we can more fully understand how Herodotus deploys his digressions. For example in the *Odyssey*, Herodotus finds precedent for 'how one could maintain forward movement of the plot while narrating events that occurred outside the time frame of the epic' (Marincola 2006: 14). This is illustrated by the Solon story, for although 'the interview with Croesus at Sardis is rejected by the majority of scholars as a purely legendary event' (Markianos 1974: 9) it is integral to Book One. This is because of the important themes it emphasises so it is very far from being irrelevant to the *Histories* as a whole. Through realizing that Herodotus was a writer who was 'deeply indebted to his poetic predecessors both for the presentation of his work and for the themes to be found in it' (Marincola 2006: 13) and by remembering his own three aims to 'ὡς μήτε τὰ γενόμενα ἐξ ἀνθρώπων τῷ χρόνῳ ἐξίτηλα γένηται, μήτε ἔργα μεγάλα τε καὶ θωμαστά', which by necessity includes stories such as Arion, we gain a view of his narrative that digressions are far from irrelevant but vital to the narrative of Herodotus.

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