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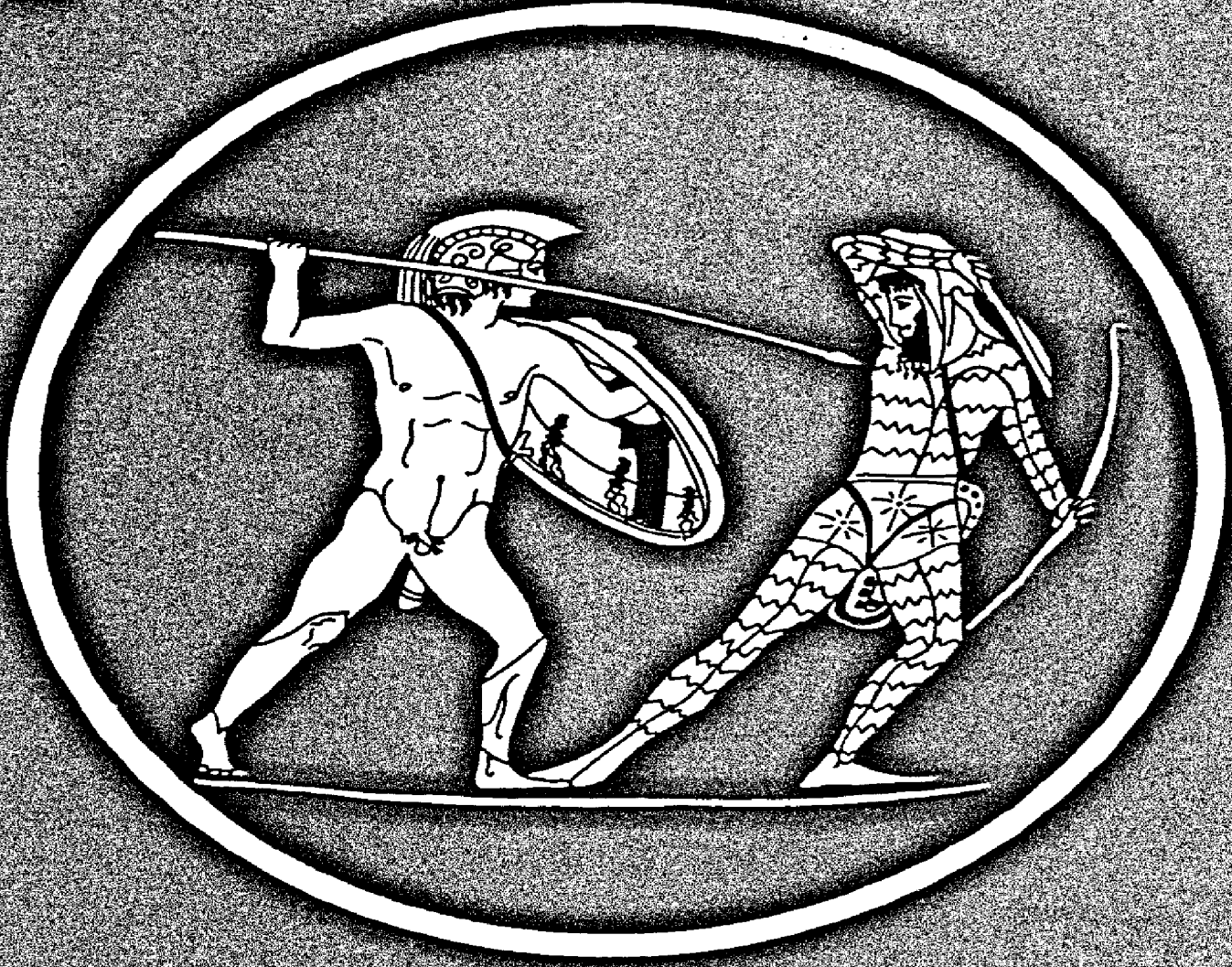
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HISTORICAL ANSWERS TO HISTORICAL QUESTIONS: THE ORIGINS OF HISTORY IN ANCIENT GREECE

CHRISTIAN MEIER

According to Cicero, and also to present-day opinion, Herodotus was the Father of History (*pater historiae*). This means that he was the first to write in the literary genre which, as far as we know, was first called "history" by Aristotle. Herodotus himself called his work only *logos* "prose account," or *historiēs apodexis* "research report," terms which make no commitment as to the subject of the account, the object of the research.¹ And Herodotus does write about a great variety of things; apart from "historical" topics — sequences of political and military events — he deals with geography, ethnography and other subjects.

Of the terms which Herodotus uses for what we would consider his historical subject, all are plural, none are singular. Thus he speaks of happenings (*ta genomēna ex anthrōpōn* "things which people caused to happen"), deeds and works (*erga*). Later we find other terms like *praxeis* and *pragmata*, which it seems were originally used to define actions, but later also included the whole combination of actions that makes up an event. We could possibly be justified in saying that Herodotus' original question, why the Greeks and barbarians waged war against each other, indicates a single great historical interrelationship. But if it does, he himself has no word for it.

The unity of history, i.e., historiography, which Aristotle discovers about a century later, is as he says not a unity of actions but

¹ Cicero, *De legibus* 1.5. Strasburger 1982.2.838 f. For the terminology see Brunner *et al.* 1975.2.595 ff. In general see two works where I have dealt with this material: Meier 1973 and 1978, both reprinted in Meier 1980. (This article was translated by Katherine M. Trawter [Stuttgart] with revisions by the author and the guest editor.)

of time (*dēlōsis henos chronou*). History deals with "what occurred at a particular time to one or more people who behaved toward each other as they happened to do." In contrast to poetry, historical events do not run toward a single end (*hen telos*).² Thus history has as its content a variety of actions and events, just as it is presented to us by Herodotus.

This view did not change, as far as we know, until Polybius observed that a coherent whole emerged from the great number of different events or sequences of events (*praxeis*): the world's many isolated histories (*sporades . . . tēs oikoumenēs praxeis*) merged in the Roman Empire. Everything was directed toward one end (*hen telos*). History assumed, as it were, the shape of a body (*sōmatoeidēs*). Polybius is quite clearly alluding to Aristotle when he attributes not only to historiography but to historical reality the characteristics of poetic unity: a plot with a beginning, a middle and an end.³ For the first time the word *historia* can be used to mean the sequence of events themselves seen as a whole (*Geschehen*), since, now that they can be seen to lead to a specific end, they themselves become a unity. The fact that there is at least temporarily a single unified history can only be expressed by applying to reality the literary term for unity. And this practically amounts to saying that history no longer is history, but has gained the unity of action which according to Aristotle is only suited to poetry. It is presumably this that causes history to assume the shape of a body; it is no longer made up of isolated members (*disiecta membra*) but is a living organic body.⁴ It therefore becomes a whole in itself, hitherto achieved if at all only in its literary representation.

If the history of this concept is based on anything more than pure chance, it shows that in reality history could only be seen as unified when the numerous political entities in the Mediterranean were subjected to a single power, and when the process of the smaller streams flowing into this large river could be seen as having a *telos*. The "singularization" of history had to be preceded by the singularization of the political world.

² Aristotle, *Poetics* 1459a23, cf. 1451b4.

³ Polybius 1.3.3.

⁴ Polybius 1.4.7: "Those who believe that they can adequately understand the whole through the study of isolated histories seem to me to be in the same situation as those who, examining the disjointed members of a living and beautiful body, think that they are eyewitnesses of the energy and beauty of the living being."

The term "singularization of history" comes from Reinhart Koselleck⁵ and is used to designate the process out of which our modern concept of history arose in the eighteenth century. At that time once again the unity of world history was discovered: one single history grew out of the many different histories. But this time it was not the spatial unity of an empire that was meant, but the temporal unity of the history of millennia which was seen as having a final aim. What happened within this unity of time can be seen more in terms of social and cultural than of political history. It was this that determined our concept of history, a concept of a great comprehensive process of change, which is so general a process and so much a part of all of us, as well as beyond the influence of the individual, that its subject can be understood as "history itself." Thus the gravitations of perceptions are all directed toward change rather than toward stability. By "gravitations" I mean those generalizations which tend in a certain, apparently dominant direction, in which our opinions repeatedly combine to meet; social perception is most strongly determined by such gravitations. This is where the idea of the "world as history" originates.

It is useful to clarify the development of these concepts and their connections if we want to understand Herodotus' discovery more clearly. Of course we can say that he was the first to write history. We must then, however, bear in mind that he only offered certain answers to certain questions, historical answers to historical questions, but that he did not observe the phenomenon which we call "history" today.

Not only did our idea of history not yet exist; history itself as we understand it did not yet exist (unless in very rudimentary form), history namely as a radical change in all conditions of life, which takes place swiftly and perceptibly and which can be perceived as a force with its own momentum, since the individual usually has only a very small share in it. Consequently, the various individual phenomena happen in such a way that they are not as perceptible as the process as a whole, in which the force of "history" then appears to reveal itself. And of course in classical antiquity neither the bourgeoisie nor the proletariat existed, the two classes which we first find in the modern period. Being a product of that history, they could then see the whole of world history as a single social, cultural, economic or tech-

⁵ Cf. Koselleck 1979.647 ff., and Koselleck in Brunner *et al.* 1975.2.647 ff.

nological process of which they form the focal point and of which political history forms only one part.

This does not mean to say that there was in antiquity no history of culture, society or economics. But history in general had a different quality. We must attempt a precise definition of this quality and of Herodotus' historical perception, avoiding as far as possible any influence from our own modern notion of the word. It is I think one of the greatest weaknesses of the debate hitherto that scholars have been unaware of this problem and have based their approach too firmly on a modern conception of history that was neither sufficiently discussed nor clearly defined, and that too little attention was paid to what was really original about Herodotus' history and how it related to the events of his time.⁶

In my opinion Herodotus' discovery of history should be characterized as follows: He examines the genesis of certain events, namely the Persian War and the Greek victory. His answer is determined by the fact that he traces a political and military process through two or three generations as a sequence of events, i.e., as caused by many different subjects which met as chance would have it. Thus, he wrote a multi-subjective, contingency-oriented account. He did this using empirical data and writing in as comprehensive a form as possible. That is the new and unprecedented element of his work, at least in the cultures of the Near East and the Mediterranean. It may even have been absolutely new, although I am not qualified enough in Chinese historiography to say. Now I would like to explain this characterization.

First, by asking questions, Herodotus sets himself apart from all those whose primary aim was to inform and preserve, such as the oriental kings, their courtiers, priests or scribes. Herodotus also wants to inform and preserve — and to a much greater extent, going far beyond the deeds of the kings — but at the same time he is inspired by the question of how the war and the victory of the Greeks came about. This determines the whole of his work and gives it its coherence. It is historical causality which he has in mind.

Second, the empirical principles of Herodotus' research stem from Ionian history. He has a relatively strict principle, which is that

⁶ On a similar problem, the question of whether the modern concept of progress can be applied to antiquity, cf. Meier 1980.435 ff.; for a different view, cf. R. Müller 1983, to which I would like to address myself in a review in *Gnomon*.

he must report eyewitness accounts, although not of course always believe them, and that he should limit himself to what he knows from these sources.⁷ For this reason, except for the *logos* on Egypt and a few other histories, he begins with Croesus, King of Lydia, since that is as far back as his information reaches. As far as I know, it is also entirely novel to publish a research report *in historicis*, as an individual, a private person with specific interests, and not speaking with a special authority, for instance one borrowed from a king. On the other hand, Herodotus' approach differs in principle from all the constructs of historical connections which were customary for the Greeks of his period when dealing with earlier epochs, for example in the case of the fifth-century theories of the origin of culture.

The third characteristic, the multi-subjectivity arising from Herodotus' orientation toward sequences of events, originates from his conviction that the essence of the long-term political and military events seen as a whole lies in the fact that various subjects, whether they be individuals or groups, armies, cities, peoples or empires, meet in a contingent manner in constantly new situations. Any references to divine intervention can be disregarded in this case.⁸ They are mostly a part of the eyewitness accounts which Herodotus is documenting, and do of course offer an interpretation of actions and their results, but whether the gods exert an effective influence or not must remain unrevealed. It goes beyond the bounds of empirical research.

I suggest that it would be practical to distinguish two ideal types of history and accordingly of historiographical approaches. On the one hand, there would be the history of actions and events, to which corresponds a contingent history (*ereignisgeschichtliche Betrachtungsweise / histoire événementielle*). On the other hand, there would be a history of processes, to which corresponds a processual history (*prozessuale Betrachtungsweise / histoire processuale*). Both types are theoretical constructs in the sense of Max Weber's ideal types. In reality they scarcely occur in pure form. They do not exclude each other and by applying both approaches we may consider the same happenings in different ways. But it is nevertheless true that there are some essential differences between such forms, not only of historical approach but of history itself. Whereas for Herodotus everything that happened was

⁷ Herodotus 2.123.1, 7.152.3; cf. 4.5.1, 195.2. See also Meier 1980.390 ff.

⁸ Meier 1980.392 f., 395 ff.

the action of a limited number of subjects and the events in which they met under contingent circumstances, other historians may perceive primarily historical processes in a narrow sense of the word, which were basically independent of individual human actions and events. Consciously or unconsciously the processual approach assumes that either a certain process is initiated by a divine power (as in the ancient cultures of the Middle East), or that for some reason or other an infinite number of effects and side effects of human actions finally cumulate in a particular direction. In any case, it is not the events that are of interest here, but the process of change. Of course the sequence of events can also be called a process, but that is not the meaning of the word which designates it in contrast to *histoire événementielle*.⁹ If we make this differentiation, it also becomes clear that although the approach through single historical events must of course deal with more than one force, it can in fact take into account only a limited number of individual or group subjects. Unless for example you want to describe a battle as a chaos or as a large process, you cannot avoid describing the many people who are participating in it as being organized into a few units, even if it is their dissolution which may have to be described.

There is, of course, nothing unusual in the multi-subjective approach. Hardly any battle, hardly any diplomatic mission or intrigue, no complicated decision-making process (in the wider sense of the word) can be understood otherwise. Therefore we have to assume that the Egyptians and Assyrians, for example, were perfectly capable of applying this approach. Otherwise they would not have been able to judge the success or failure of such events. Thus this sort of story was not only reconstructed in the cabinet room¹⁰ but also told round the campfire and in other places. In the Old Testament, for example, we can find the story of David's successors constructed along similar lines.¹¹ In general, however, affairs of state will hardly have appeared to the public as contingent.

⁹ Cf. Faber and Meier 1978.

¹⁰ Once, apparently as an exception, a story of this sort is recorded: cf. Assmann 1983-84.175 ff. To be sure, deliberations in which the king enforces the right decision contrary to his advisers are found in the Egyptian novels of kings; cf. Hornung 1967.49 f.

¹¹ Cf. Meier 1980.331 f., 386, with the literature referred to both there and in this discussion.

Nevertheless, in all these stories the plurality of the subjects and their necessarily contingent interaction belongs within the framework of short limited events, such as a battle, a military campaign, or a diplomatic mission. Herodotus' innovation is that he composes longer pieces of history, as we would call it, covering several generations, in this multi-subjective way: he sees them as long sequences of human actions and events, caused not merely by human beings but by very different human beings and political or military units. I know of no other examples of this. Perhaps there were some in China and perhaps also in the lost Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Israel (1 Kings 15.23), but certainly not in the form in which the history of the Israelites is found in the Old Testament.¹²

I call Herodotus' method "giving historical answers to historical questions."¹³ Historical questions are those that look for long-term changes to explain an outcome. Of course one could explain the origins of the Persian War in other ways, such as by a mythical connection between histories, which caused East and West repeatedly to wrong and to punish each other. This has been done, as Herodotus shows, perhaps not without irony, at the beginning of his work. Or it could be explained as the result of a mood or dream of the Persian king, or as the expression of the momentum of his dynasty or empire pushing for expansion, or as a reaction to the Ionian rebellion. All these explanations are documented by Herodotus. The mythical and political questions also stretch into time in various ways, but do not aim at longer sequences of events seen multi-subjectively.

There were also various non-historical answers to questions about the Greek victory over the Persians, such as the religious answer that Zeus did not want one person to rule over East and West. If this explanation is accepted, the way in which the Persian purpose failed is no longer so important. There was also the politico-ethical answer, which introduced the question of the qualitative superiority of the Greeks, their freedom and virtues, as opposed to the quantitative superiority of the Persians. There is also the geographical answer, which maintained that the large Eastern power was unable to work to its full potential in the small space of the Aegean.

¹² Cf. von Rad 1948.163 f.

¹³ For this and the following discussion, cf. Meier 1980.379 ff.

Herodotus reports all these answers in a way that does not necessarily mean that he was indifferent to them. But they were certainly insufficient for him. He wanted to know how everything had really happened, what had followed what, and what had influenced what. So he showed how the Persian Empire grew up, how Sparta and Athens became powerful, and how it was various chance motives, some of them highly personal, of individual leaders which in a very complicated interaction caused the Ionian conflict with the Persians. He told how Athens let herself be persuaded to support the rebellion, how this again was connected with the fact that the city was organized on principles close to democracy and had just become one of the most powerful cities in Greece, and how the Persian attacks on the Greek mother country followed the Ionian rebellion. He traced the developments which, thanks largely to chance, led to the battle and victory at Marathon, then to Xerxes' decision to go to war, his preparations for it, the treaty between the Greek cities and the equipping of the fleet in Athens. And finally he provides a long list of military events.

However important the other explanations might have been for Herodotus, he left them as it were melted down, or let us say "dissolved" into his history. He could not verify them — at least not as the causes of all that happened, which appeared to him to be much more complex — and if they were going to prove to be true, then they would have to do so within the framework of actions and events. In this Herodotus was on the one hand following a principle of Ionian *historia* in its sense of "research," since he tried to keep as close as possible to the empirical facts, i.e., to reports on specific individual events. The novelty in his work was merely that he applied this method to historical processes. Other motives apart, the result of this was that he had to write down his results, whereas in the case of all the other explanations of the Persian War and the Greek victory he would have been able to limit himself to oral statements.

On the other hand, however, in this long-term historical reconstruction, another experience may have found its expression, one of which the Greeks of Herodotus' time were especially conscious. Those who were living in a democracy or in some pre-stage of it were in a very strange political position, since they were able to participate in politics and join in making decisions, but were at the same time often observers of it. For a broad spectrum of the population, particularly in Athens, was so involved in politics, without necessarily being able to specialize in it, that they had a great deal of political knowledge.

Even if these people did not influence Herodotus' perspective directly, in Athens the idea of politics must have been influenced by the fact that many political interrelationships had to be explained in detail in the assemblies and also in many discussions in the squares and streets. These discussions had to be different from deliberations among experts.¹⁴ And in general, democracies made it impossible for politics to appear as the work or isolated decision of individuals, or for a battle to be seen only in terms of a king's victory. Everyone knew how many different forces were working contingently on each other. However, even if it were possible to experience politics in this way in Herodotus' period in the middle of the fifth century, we can still assume that it was an exceptional step for him to apply the same model to the interpretation of a long-term sequence of events.

Here, as whenever we are considering what is new or specific to the Greeks, we must draw on other cultures for comparison. This is done all too rarely and leads to our statements often being irresponsibly amateurish. I, too, am able to offer only limited competence, on which I would like to base a hypothesis to illuminate one field at least from the aspect of classical antiquity, while other disciplines must contribute to its more detailed study.

As far as I am able to tell, the pre-classical high cultures had on the one hand formulas and explanations for longer processes, which amounted to longer stretches of time being divided up into periods according to certain characteristics or in some cases to a numerical pattern. Their conception of this was extremely imprecise. The interrelationships of events played no part at all; it was a question of differentiating between different periods to discover a meaning which was attributed specifically to the relevant empire or people, possibly from without, but if so, from the gods, with foreign powers acting only as agents of their will.

Thus for example in the story of Joseph, the seven fat years are followed by seven lean years. There can be a regular cycle of good and bad times alternating with each other. The Chinese "mandate theory" sees a regular sequence in the rise and fall of dynasties. Or, again in China, an inevitable succession of old/new/old/new is constructed, seen as different states but morally of the same value.¹⁵ In Egypt a

¹⁴ Cf. Meier 1980.423 ff.

¹⁵ Cf. Meier 1980.387 f., 415 ff., for the literature from which I draw my information.

cycle is recognized between chaos and the re-establishment of order, in small matters as well as in larger ones.

Besides this division into periods, we have on the other hand the recognition of far-reaching events resulting usually from cultic transgressions of kings or peoples. We find this for example in Mesopotamia. But the Israelites are also capable of explaining important events solely within the framework of their own history: they have done wrong and are punished; in this interpretation the history of the great Assyrian Empire with which they became involved is quite functionally related to their own small race. Here would be an opportunity to adopt the idea of contingency in the approach to history, but in the end its place is taken by the idea of the will of God.¹⁶

These interpretations all have in common that historical processes are understood wholly within the framework of their own political unit — as if the multi-subjectivity of history meant nothing, as if one only had to suffer because of one's sins or because it was an inevitable part of that particular period of history! The meaning of events is assigned to the relevant empire or kingdom alone. The people understand it as if everything revolved around them, they relate everything to themselves. It is my theory that the members of these cultures were only capable of a multi-subjective approach in the case of small units of experience, and that they were not able to translate events as they experienced them into greater temporal dimensions or into the context of a long-term history of events. Moreover, when considering the larger dimensions, for them any idea of contingency gets lost in the wholesale assumption that there is some coherence of meaning. And I believe that this is an anthropological principle which is seldom disregarded (and then for special reasons), to such an extent that any divergence from this "ethnocentric" or "imperiocentric" approach becomes an exception. This is the case, for example, in Greece and in the modern age. The Greeks in particular could endure the perception of contingency as far as it was necessary to understand history — when it was necessary.

Norbert Elias maintains that in the modern age, the ability to understand that natural events are ruled by autonomous laws was

¹⁶ As von Rad 1944.5 f. observes: "Das Vermögen, eine blosse Aufeinanderfolge von Einzelereignissen überhaupt als Geschichte zu sehen und zu verstehen, verdankt das alte Israel der Eigenart seines Gottesglaubens."

preceded by a new level of “self-distancing,” an “increased control of the spontaneous feelings” of people, that everything they experience, and in particular everything that concerns them, is also shaped for them and is the expression of a purpose, an aim, something predetermined, which they relate to themselves, i.e., to the people who are experiencing and involved.¹⁷ This is the reason why it was not at all easy to accept the truth of the heliocentric system.

The early Greeks were also familiar with this idea of relating anything that happened to themselves. For Hesiod, for example, the whole fate of a city depends on the way in which the judges interpret the law — not only the political fate of the city but also the wealth of its inhabitants, and even the question of whether the oak trees on the hills bear acorns or the sheep give any wool.¹⁸ But this way of looking at things was difficult to uphold in the smallness of the Greek world. Aeschylus uses the history of the Persians and their king to explain why they were conquered by the Greeks: he explains it as a consequence of a lapse of the time limit allotted to their empire and as a result of the *hybris* of Xerxes.¹⁹ In the case of Herodotus we find the old attitude, which presumably was still prevalent outside Greece, side by side with the new attitude. In the *logos* on Egypt he tells us how the Greeks of Cyrene defeated King Apries and “since he was destined to be met by misfortune this did in fact happen and for reasons which I . . . will explain in more detail later” (2.161.4). On the other hand, further on he says in connection with the history of Cyrene, “since the Egyptians had never measured themselves against the Greeks before and had underestimated them, they were totally defeated” (4.159.6). Thus in one case it was a battle between two armies, and in the other the fulfillment of fate, whose source is unknown. It is impossible to trace precisely the stages through which the Greeks went to reach their more exact understanding — and their conspicuously high tolerance for contingency. But it is at least clear that even in the age of Solon, as far as domestic affairs were concerned, they had gained such a high understanding of the natural laws of politics that the only reason to see them as divine punishment was to find religious corroboration

¹⁷ Elias 1969.LVIII f. In the modern age, with its facility for self-distancing, it is even possible to develop the “art of not having been part of it” (*die Kunst es nicht gewesen zu sein*). Cf. Marquard 1973.73 ff.

¹⁸ *Works and Days* 225 ff.

¹⁹ So in his drama *The Persians*.

for political knowledge.²⁰ Political events were thus completely disconnected from natural events; hence in the long run it was only superstition which brought them together (for example when an army related an eclipse of the sun to itself).

Only when considering these examples does it become clear how seminal and important an achievement it was to recount long-term history objectively, focusing only on events. Nevertheless, there were still numerous older attitudes influencing Herodotus (for example, the idea that no power was fated to become too great, that a rise was always succeeded by a fall), which determine his understanding of many histories and particularly of the defeat of the Persians. They did not, however, make his history unnecessary for him, because they were only presumptions — presumptions as to the meaning of events — and because he still remained bound to empirical research.

Fourth, by expressing the results of his research in written form, Herodotus was indeed following a certain tradition, but one which had hitherto dealt with different things. Moreover, it was essential if he wanted to order the enormous amount of material that covered not only a long period of time but also a large area. However, experience must also have shown him how quickly stories and deeds from the past are forgotten. Besides the historical aspect it was clearly also his aim to preserve what he had discovered by writing it down. It was obviously important to him in its own right; several of his digressions can hardly be otherwise explained.²¹

Although the Greeks' interest in writing down and preserving past works and events had previously been conspicuously limited, it increased notably later. It is difficult to say how far what was handed down was changed by being recorded in written form. The variety of attitudes and interpretations which we find in Herodotus' *logoi* would suggest that he recorded them more or less as they were told to him. On the other hand the sequence in which he wrote them in the work as a whole gave them a new implication.

Two final questions remain to be asked:

- (1) how did Herodotus come to write his *History*,
and

²⁰ Solon 3.8.10. On this subject for the present see Meier 1970.19 ff.

²¹ Meier 1980.371 ff. The complex problem of how far it is a question of "digressions" cannot be pursued here. On this subject see Cobet 1971.

- (2) to what extent did his perception of sequences of events coincide with the quality of ancient history (in the sense of *Geschehen*, i.e., the combination of events seen as a whole)? Or, in broader terms, why did historiography in classical antiquity confine itself largely to the history of events? How far developed was the awareness of processes? And — what is by no means the same thing — what was the attitude of the Greeks toward the history of structures?

First, it is not very satisfactory to assume that the general advance of Ionian research would necessarily have led to the discovery of history, even if we do see all the scientific abilities of the Greeks concentrated here. Of course it played its part, but why was it Herodotus who discovered history around 450, and not somebody else in 500 B.C.? That is why it is often assumed that the Persian War prompted his question. There may be a reasonable amount of truth in this, whatever other explanations there were. And it is not difficult to accept that the special understanding of political processes which developed within the Attic democracy (and its observation by outsiders) was a further decisive factor. There would have been sufficient opportunities to arouse Herodotus' interest and channel it in certain directions.

It is my opinion that there was a further factor, which was that Herodotus felt that his idea of predetermined laws of nature in the world and of the limits of mankind were being called into question by all kinds of new and almost modern attitudes in contemporary Athens. For there it was thought that as far as knowledge, ability and the development of power were concerned, numerous barriers had been broken down or could be broken down, which had previously always been valid and had been either respected or disregarded to one's own cost. And for quite a long time this worked amazingly well. A whole city, the most powerful city in Greece, appeared to have burst its bounds. Then the questions were asked: was it still valid to say that no one could become too powerful, that every rise was followed by a fall?

But Herodotus' answer was precisely that this was still the case. It had been demonstrated at least to a large extent in the greatest event that was known, the Persian War. This far-reaching event that caused

so much change still adhered to the old predetermined patterns.²² Was it not particularly this question that led Herodotus to write history?

Second, Greek historiography was also in the following centuries determined by the fact that sequences of political and military events were constructed on the basis of source material, which was however sometimes used only indirectly and could be padded out with rhetorical embellishments. It was to this that the type of narration called history referred; this was its content. Many other things which influenced events could be included, such as the development of weapons, techniques of communication and reports on foreign peoples, but these were not given in the form of a history of culture but rather of a description of a state of affairs.²³ Information was also given on economic factors when relevant. But the focus remained on the political aspects.

Structural history on the other hand is usually understood as a part of the history of events. As far as it is recognized at all, it consists almost entirely of actions, such as legislation or the reform of constitutions, and much less of processes. However, those things that we include in it on the basis of our modern conception of history, such as economic history, the history of science and certain gradual changes in constitutional history, were at that time usually to be found outside historiography, for example as the history of philosophy in Aristotle's first book of the *Metaphysics* or in his sketches of constitutional history, in Plato's works and those of many representatives of the individual sciences, such as medicine, who were concerned with their predecessors. Relatively few connections were set up between the various histories: Plato relates constitution and music, Aristotle relates constitution and demography or military affairs and also philosophy and economics. But these histories were never synchronized to comprise a whole. I maintain that this would not have been possible, because the Greeks were scarcely able to perceive this type of historical connection; or in other words, it was not a part of historiography or only marginally such, since historiography did not comprise all that we understand as history today. It is not without reason that it was not until the modern age that this type of historical connection was in-

²² See Meier 1980.427 ff. for a fuller treatment of this issue.

²³ Pace Strasburger 1966.16 f. (= Strasburger 1982.2.972 f.).

cluded in the concept of history (when it became “singularized” according to social aspects).²⁴

Seeing history as a series of politico-military events corresponded closely to the way classical antiquity perceived, caused and experienced events and changes within the framework of time. This was particularly true for the fifth century. At that time the citizens of Athens developed a political identity unprecedented in world politics: they were primarily citizens, conscious of themselves as such, and behaved accordingly. Developments in the field of politics were of prime importance to them and to anyone who had dealings with them.

The world of small city-states in which this took place possessed an extraordinary “commensurability” between the individuals and the events, a close correlation between the dimensions of the scope of the individual and of his world, which was largely synonymous with his city, and the dimensions of the events which he could perceive. He had a say in what decisions were taken, including those on the battlefield; things took place visibly among all the people and between the cities. Here, political actions and events stood in the foreground of attention for everyone. The relationship between an individual and all that happened in his surroundings was enormously favorable to human pride. Here, relatively speaking, it was possible to achieve a high level of human greatness and people were necessarily strongly disinclined to see themselves or others as the function of a process,²⁵ which for particular reasons is possible and imperative in modern times. Changes of any note in the economic situation or in other respects were

²⁴ Meier 1980.408 ff. Ancient historiography apparently reaches the limits of its possibilities in the work of Poseidonios; cf. Strasburger 1982.2.1010 ff. and Meier 1975.605 f. Agatharchides also occupies an interesting place, difficult to define more exactly; cf. Strasburger 1982.2.1006. Strasburger’s paper suffers from the fact that it is based too much on the modern concept of history, although he is aware of the peculiarity of ancient historiography. But that is, as I have said, a common phenomenon, which easily results in underestimating the achievement of ancient historiography. That Herodotus deals with only a limited chronological dimension is not a disadvantage but on the contrary a great advantage: it is closely connected with his empirical use of sources and with the discovery of the history of actions and events (*Ereignisgeschichte*). Furthermore it is also an indication of progress that Greek historiography is rarely helpful for reconstructing long-term processes — much less for example than Hesiod’s myth of the ages. For further problems caused by the application of the modern notion of history, see Meier 1975.597n.9.

²⁵ On this whole complex see Meier 1979.371 ff.; Meier 1980.247 ff., 342; Meier 1984.7 ff.

usually a function of politics and warfare and therefore of interest in relation to these.

Generally speaking, we can say that the gravitations of perceptions in Greece were directed toward continuity and not toward change. This is true in spite of the great changes which took place in the field of politics and advances made in the scientific field, as well as in the skill and use of methodology in so many areas in the fifth century. On the whole these remained within the bound of "increase of human ability."²⁶ The variety of observations consolidated and developed toward a "consciousness of human ability," but never reached the state where progress was perceived as a process of comprehensive change.²⁷ Therefore it restricted its focus to individual participants or a small circle and its object was limited to factual ability and knowledge, not including those changes which can result from a multiplication of such an ability and knowledge.

Therefore I would most strongly urge that we consider the relevance of historical anthropology in this context, and in doing so take into account among other things the difference between a conception of history which is oriented toward actions and events and one which centers on processes. We have to consider the difference between various types of people, and their relationships with the events and changes they produce and with which they are confronted — but also the different ways in which a person relates to what he can experience as the past and to the world as a whole by identifying with larger units.

I would like to add one last thought in respect to classical antiquity. The Greek tolerance for contingency was obviously connected with the fact that, as Vernant has shown, the Greeks could conceive of the cosmos and nature as unrelated to any single human or godly force that was particularly responsible for them.²⁸ On the contrary, cosmos and nature were determined by laws which stretched beyond any single force. It is true that the order of the polis could be understood in analogy with that of the cosmos, but since Solon the fate of the political unit was no longer interrelated with that of the cosmos and of nature, as it had been in the Orient. It depended rather on the decision of the citizens. Moreover, the totality of the cosmos corresponded to

²⁶ For details see Edelstein 1967.

²⁷ Cf. Meier 1980.435 ff.

²⁸ Vernant 1962.

the variety of political units in it, so the individual units could not interpret the meaning of what happened to them only with reference to themselves. There was no room for interpretations based on differentiating between periods, such as a regular cycle of good and bad times alternating with each other. Accordingly, a completely new attitude toward the enemy developed: instead of being despised, he was regarded as an equal.²⁹

In addition, parallel to the cosmos, the justice and stability of the political order had to be considered as interrelated. The difficulties which this could cause were countered by historical constructions among other things: Aeschylus, for example, appears to have invented especially for Zeus a long story whose beginnings were most unsavory, so that continuity could be guaranteed for the future: to make his reign eternal and just, Zeus first had to learn moderation.³⁰ Solon had already discovered that the characteristic of good order lay in the fact that within it no processes progressed toward a bad end. This opinion, which focused on the heart of the polis, corresponded outwardly with that of Herodotus. He thought that justice finally won through in the numerous units which formed the stage of history, because every rise was balanced by a fall, as a reparation for the harm that had been caused. Combined, they both showed that the law of justice is unchanging: the world as a whole remains untouched by any contingency, whereas on the smaller scale, it is all too full of it, since it is a world of limited actions. So the preconditions of the Greeks' ability to understand history as a history of events were apparently related to many other peculiarities of their thinking.

Since all this belongs to that history which itself led to democracy and therefore to far-reaching changes touching even the question of identity, it is a part of one of the most important steps made in the progress of mankind. And should we try to deny that *histoire événementielle* was also such a step when, on the political level which originated at that time in the cities, there evolved the possibility of applying empirical, scientific methods to the study of long-term histories of events?

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²⁹ Meier 1980.45 f., 152, 208 f.; cf. 388, 418.

³⁰ In the *Prometheus*. For a more detailed study, see "Zeus nach dem Umbruch. Zur politischen Theologie des Aischylos," forthcoming in a collection of my papers.