TRUTH, TRUTHFULNESS AND THE BEGINNINGS OF ANCIENT GREEK HISTORIOGRAPHY: A CRITICAL RESPONSE TO BERNARD WILLIAMS

ABSTRACT

This article offers a critical evaluation of Bernard Williams's influential account of ancient Greek historiography and the place of ancient Greek thought in the early history of ideas in his last book Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy *(Princeton, 2002). It argues that such an evaluation is warranted now not only because Williams's stance continues to influence how Herodotus and Thucydides are viewed by scholars outside of classical studies; more importantly, it also opens up the field of classical studies itself to a much needed engagement with those ideas from Williams's influential study that can be productively applied to the study of Herodotus and Thucydides.*

The first part consists of a critical appraisal of Williams's views in light of current classical scholarship on early Greek historiography. The second part makes the case for why Herodotus rather than Thucydides would have served as the better example for Williams to explore the historical conditions and intellectual milieu that led to the emergence of truth and truthfulness as a problem in the Western historiographic tradition. Drawing on recent classical scholarship, the article shows that it was Herodotus, rather than Thucydides, who first conceived of the truth as a problem; that it was him rather than Thucydides who first grappled with sincerity and accuracy as the values that Williams identifies as fundamental to the truth-claims embedded in the historiographic tradition.

The article thus suggests that the history of truthfulness as a relational concept that binds together author and audience in a mutual contract of trust should start with him rather than Thucydides. It shows how Williams's account of truth as a social value that binds author and audience together in a mutual contract of trust can be productively applied to the study of Herodotus' Histories. *A conclusion focuses on the role that has typically been attributed to the ancient world in genealogical accounts of the history of ideas.*

Keywords: Williams; historiography; Herodotus; Thucydides; truthfulness; genealogy; history of ideas

1. INTRODUCTION

In his last book, *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy*, the late Bernard Williams offers a compelling account of the idea of the truth and the social values and benefits associated with truth-telling.[1] Since it was first published, the book has gained wide recognition within the philosophical literature. Fifteen years after C. Koopman's prediction that it would provide 'a crucial turning point in the history of analytic philosophy', the book seems to have delivered.[2] It has proved exemplary for a new form of a 'historically-engaged philosophy' that combines what has traditionally been

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[1] B. Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy* (Princeton, 2002).

[2] C. Koopman, 'Bernard Williams on philosophy's need for history', *RMeta* 64 (2010), 3–30, at 4. The broad appeal of *Truth and Truthfulness* is evident from its accrual (according to Google Scholar) of well over 3000 citations to date.

ahistorical analytical reflection with historical analysis.[3] Williams's book now stands as the go-to work for all those who wish to consider the social significance of truthfulness beyond the impasse between those who deny that something like the truth exists on the one hand and more pragmatic positions that retain some space for truth and objectivity on the other.

Unfortunately, despite its significance to several areas of current debate, the book has been largely sidelined by students of the ancient world. If it features in classical scholarship at all, it is mostly in passing. This includes recent works that explore conceptions of truth and truthfulness in an area central to Williams's account: early Greek historiography.[4] In light of current classical scholarship in this area, Williams's views on Herodotus and Thucydides and their respective contributions to the history of ideas seem too problematic for classical scholars to be productively applied to the study of early Greek historiography. It thus seems safer to forego his ideas on truth and truthfulness altogether. As a result, there is no sustained critical engagement with Williams's views from within classical scholarship to date.

This is regrettable not least because other parts of *Truth and Truthfulness* feature ideas that can productively be applied to the study of the ancient Greek world. Moreover, as the go-to work for conceptions of truthfulness in the history of ideas Williams's book also influences how scholars outside of classical studies (who may not be familiar with recent research on early Greek historiography) view Herodotus, Thucydides and their respective contributions to the history of ideas. It is thus high time for a critical engagement with Williams from the point of view of the Classicist in order to separate those parts of his argument that can be productively applied to the study of the ancient world from those that cannot.

This article sets out to offer such a critical engagement. A particular focus will be on Williams's claims about ancient Greek historiography and the place of ancient Greek thought in the early history of ideas. The first part critically appraises Williams's reading of Herodotus and Thucydides in light of current classical scholarship on early Greek historiography. The second part makes the case for why Herodotus rather than Thucydides would have served as the better example for Williams to explore the historical conditions and intellectual milieu that led to the emergence of truth and truthfulness as a problem in the Western historiographic tradition.

Drawing on recent classical scholarship, I show that it was Herodotus, rather than Thucydides, who first conceived of the truth as a problem; that it was him rather than Thucydides who first grappled with sincerity and accuracy as the values that Williams identifies as fundamental to the truth-claims embedded in the historiographic tradition. The value of Williams's account for the study of Herodotus and Thucydides then emerges from his conception of truthfulness as a social and relational concept that binds together author and audience in a mutual contract of trust. Applied to the way in which questions of truth and truthfulness feature not only in Herodotus' own authorial interventions but also in some of the stories he reports, Williams's views are productive. The critical engagement with Williams's work helps us to see more clearly why and how the truth emerged in the Greek historiographic tradition both as a social value and a problem of critical enquiry.

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[3] Koopman (n. 2), 3. On the significance of Williams's conceptions of truth within and beyond philosophy see also (both with further literature): D. Callcut, *Reading Bernard Williams* (London, 2008), 1–6; M. Jenkins, *Bernard Williams* (London, 2006), 121–48 ('truth, objectivity and knowledge').
[4] See below with references.

2. HERODOTUS, THUCYDIDES AND THE BEGINNINGS OF HISTORY

To understand William's conception of truth it is important to first consider his methodology. Williams accounts for the ideas of truth and truthfulness by developing and adapting the Nietzschean conception of a 'genealogy'.[5] More specifically, he seeks to excavate the values associated with the truth and truthfulness—above all, those of sincerity and accuracy—by tracing their origins and evolution over time.[6] To this end, he combines two perspectives: first, what in analogy to similar accounts in political philosophy he refers to as a 'state-of-nature story'—an abstract and atemporal narration of the origins of truth and truthfulness as values fundamental to human cooperation and thus sociality. And second, a historical exposition of the emergence of the values associated with truth-telling and their evolution over time. Taken together, both perspectives allow Williams to account for the 'metaphysical origins' of the truth relating them to a common humanity and specific historical circumstance.

For the latter, historical perspective, Williams repeatedly turns to the ancient Greek world and the beginning of the historiographic tradition during the late fifth/early fourth century B.C.E. In particular, the transition between Herodotus (*c.* 485–425 B.C.E.) and Thucydides (*c.* 460–400 B.C.E.) serves as a case in point for him to illustrate an important step in the history of ideas. Williams argues that it was with Thucydides that the truth was first set on firm conceptual footing: in his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, he distinguished mythical from historical times—thus creating the very fundaments on which conceptions of the truth and truthfulness in the writing of the past come to rest up to the present day.

To substantiate this claim, Williams compares how both authors represent the very substance of history: time. As Williams rightly points out, Thucydides employs a temporal grid outside of the events that he recounts. His history follows the individual years of the Peloponnesian War, using the seasons (summer and winter) as additional temporal markers.[7] In Herodotus' *Histories*, by contrast, time is embedded in the events of the past. It features as a much more fragmentary affair, in the form of multiple instances of 'before' and 'after' that remain tied to the succession of individual leaders and their achievements, and inscribed within the larger narrative of the expansion of the Persian empire prior to the Graeco-Persian Wars.[8]

Williams takes such differences between Herodotus and Thucydides as evidence for a fundamental shift that occurred between them. While Herodotus still grappled with 'a certain kind of indeterminacy about the past', Thucydides used a temporal framework that allocated all events a fixed chronological place.[9] This, in turn, allowed him to distinguish myth from history. His account is focussed mostly on the events that Thucydides himself witnessed firsthand, thus enhancing his credibility and authority as

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[5] On genealogy as a method derived from Nietzsche, Foucault, and others see M. Bevir, 'What is genealogy?', *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 2 (2008), 263–75.

[6] Sincerity and accuracy as the virtues of truth and truthfulness: Williams (n. 1), 84–122 ('sincerity'), 123–48 ('accuracy').

[7] Time in Thucydides: E. Greenwood, *Thucydides and the Shaping of History* (London, 2006), 42–56; J.L. Moles, 'Truth and untruth in Herodotus and Thucydides', in J. Marincola (ed.), *The Collected Papers of J. L. Moles* (Leiden, 2023), 2.159–89, at 179.

[8] Time in Herodotus: e.g. J. Cobet, 'The organization of time in the *Histories*', in E.J. Bakker, I.J.F. de Jong and H. van Wees (edd.), *Brill's Companion to Herodotus* (Leiden, 2002), 387–412; T. Rood, 'Mythical and historical time in Herodotus', in K.S. Kingsley, G. Monti and T. Rood (edd.), *The Authoritative Historian: Tradition and Innovation in Ancient Historiography* (Cambridge, 2022), 62–8.

[9] Williams (n. 1), 157.

the researcher and narrator of his history. Although mythical events also, occasionally at least, find their way into his account, they do so considerably less often.[10] And if they do, they are either quickly dismissed, marked out as hearsay or rationalized in other ways that acknowledge a fundamental difference between the *spatium mythicum* and *historicum*.[11]

So, what kind of evidence does Williams put forth in support of his argument?

Williams's reading of Herodotus and Thucydides centres upon their respective presentation of the figure of Minos, the eponymous king of Minoan Greece whose historicity remains contested in classical scholarship up to this day.[12] In a chapter entitled 'What's Wrong with Minos?', Williams explores similarities and differences in Herodotus' and Thucydides' presentations of this figure. It is here that Williams sees the larger conceptual differences between their respective ways of writing the past coming to the fore.

In the *Histories*, Minos features in relation to the historical figure of Polycrates, who seized power over Samos in about 535 B.C.E. and who, as tyrant, turned the island into a great naval power. Herodotus states:

Πολυκράτης γὰρ ἐστὶ πρῶτος τῶν ἡμεῖς ἴδμεν Ἑλλήνων ὃς θαλασσοκρατέειν ἐπενοήθη, πάρεξ Μίνω τε τοῦ Κνωσίου καὶ εἰ δή τις ἄλλος πρότερος τούτου ἦρξε τῆς θαλάσσης· τῆς δὲ ἀνθρωπηίης λεγομένης γενεῆς Πολυκράτης πρῶτος, ἐλπίδας πολλὰς ἔχων Ἰωνίης τε καὶ νήσων ἄρξειν.[13]

Williams renders this passage as follows:

'(He was) the first of whom we know to have aimed at control of the sea; apart from Minos the Cretan or someone earlier than he who may have ruled the seas. But out of what is called the human race, Polycrates was the first.'[14]

Williams draws on this passage to show that Herodotus did not (yet) distinguish myth from history. By referring to Minos' problematic humanity—he features as semi-divine elsewhere in Greek thought and literature—Herodotus (so Williams) implicitly acknowledges that such fantastic creatures once populated the world during an earlier time.[15] Williams thus concludes that what we today would dismiss as myth, for Herodotus still appears to be part of a temporal continuum.

Thucydides, by contrast, presents Minos as follows. In what appears to echo Herodotus' description of Minos' sea power he states:

Μίνως γὰρ παλαίτατος ὧν ἀκοῇ ἴσμεν ναυτικὸν ἐκτήσατο καὶ τῆς νῦν Ἑλληνικῆς θαλάσσης ἐπὶ πλεῖστον ἐκράτησε καὶ τῶν Κυκλάδων νήσων ἦρξέ τε καὶ οἰκιστὴς πρῶτος τῶν πλείστων ἐγένετο, Κᾶρας ἐξελάσας καὶ τοὺς ἑαυτοῦ παῖδας ἡγεμόνας ἐγκαταστήσας· τό τε ληστικόν, ὡς εἰκός, καθῄρει ἐκ τῆς θαλάσσης ἐφ᾽ ὅσον ἐδύνατο, τοῦ τὰς προσόδους μᾶλλον ἰέναι αὐτῷ.

'Minos was the earliest known figure we hear about to acquire a navy and he made himself master over most of what is now called the Hellenic Sea; he ruled over the Cyclades and was in most cases the first to found colonies in them, driving out the Carians and installing his own sons

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[10] See e.g. Thuc. 3.88.3, 4.24.4, 6.2.1.
[11] Thucydides' use of myth: R.V. Munson, 'Thucydides and myth: a complex relation to past and present', in R. Balot, S. Forsdyke and E. Foster (edd.), *The Oxford Handbook of Thucydides* (Oxford, 2017), 257–65 (with further literature).
[12] Williams (n. 1), 155–71.
[13] Hdt. 3.122.2.
[14] Williams (n. 1), 155.
[15] Minos as a semi-divine figure: e.g. Hom. *Il.* 13.445, 14.321, *Od.* 11.568, Diod. Sic. 5.78.

as governors. He probably also cleared piracy from the seas as far as he was able, to enable his revenues to get through to him more easily.'[16]

At first sight, this might seem less critical and more accepting of Minos' historicity than Herodotus' statement. And yet, Williams takes this passage to show that, in contrast to Herodotus, Thucydides acknowledges Minos' mythical character. By highlighting that the information at the core of this passage is based on oral tradition (*hôn akoê ismen*, 'about whom we know by hearsay' or 'by tradition'), Thucydides flags the mythical quality of Minos. As Williams succinctly put it: 'If it is said that Minos was a legendary or mythical figure, then Thucydides will say that you may of course tell a story about him, but you cannot tell that story in just the way you assert what happened yesterday; the story is a myth or legend, and if you assert it in just that way [as if it was historical fact] [. . .] you assert something untrue.'[17] The dismissive qualifying participle *legomenês* ('they say') in Herodotus' Minos passage, by contrast, does not operate in the same way; it also provides no further clue as to the kind of problem that separates Minos from Polycrates.[18] It merely allows Herodotus to separate his own voice from whatever it is that makes Minos unfit to serve as the starting point for the history of naval domination.[19] So, even though at first sight Thucydides seems less explicitly critical than Herodotus in his take on Minos, Williams sees him as ultimately surpassing Herodotus' critical stance by flagging Minos' mythical qualities.

3. WHAT'S WRONG WITH WILLIAMS'S READING OF MINOS?

There is a long history of scholarly engagement with the Minos passage and the question of whether it indicates that Herodotus distinguished between myth and history more generally.[20] Williams, who read Literae Humaniores ('Greats') at Balliol College, Oxford, in the late 1940s and who was taught by Eduard Fraenkel and E.R. Dodds, is well aware of this tradition and the fact that he navigates contested waters here.[21] And yet, he opens his discussion of early Greek historiography not with a discussion of classical scholarship,[22] but with two short references to two older philosophers—David Hume and Thomas Hobbes—whose position on Herodotus and Thucydides is

[16] Thuc. 1.4 (transl. Mynott).

[17] Williams (n. 1), 162.

[18] See Hdt. 3.122.2 with E. Baragwanath and M. de Bakker, 'Myth, truth, and narrative in Herodotus' *Histories*', in E. Baragwanath and M. de Bakker (edd.), *Myth, Truth, and Narrative in Herodotus* (Oxford, 2012), 1–56, at 23–9.

[19] See E. Irwin, 'The politics of precedence: first "historians" on first "thalassocrats"', in R. Osborne (ed.), *Debating the Athenian Cultural Revolution. Art, Literature, Philosophy, and Politics 430–380 BC* (Cambridge, 2007), 188–223 for the suggestion that Herodotus is referring to contemporary thinkers here.

[20] See e.g. F. Jacoby, s.v. 'Herodotos', *RE* Suppl. 2 (2013), 205–520, at 335; M. Pohlenz, *Herodot, Der erste Geschichtsschreiber des Abendlandes* (Leipzig, 1937), 7; W.M. von Leyden, 'Spatium historicum', *Durham University Journal* 11 (1962), 89–104; K. von Fritz, *Die griechische Geschichtsschreibung: von den Anfängen bis Thukydides* (Berlin, 1967), 1.208–9.

[21] See e.g. Williams (n. 1), 152 with n. 2. Williams at Balliol: S. Blackburn, 'Bernard Arthur Owen Williams (1929–2003)', *PBA* 150 (2007), 335–48, at 335–6.

[22] To support his point that it was Thucydides rather than Herodotus who first separated myth from history Williams (n. 1), 296–7 n. 7 points to G. Thomas, 'Between literacy and orality: Herodotus' historiography', *MHR* 3 (1988), 54–70 and to the discussion of myth and history in J. Goody and I. Watt, 'The consequences of literacy', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 5 (1963), 304–45.

(presented by him as) essentially that of Williams himself.[23] As far as the interpretation of the Minos passage is concerned much depends on the formulation *tês de anthrôpêiês legomenês geneês* and the question what exactly it is that sets Minos apart from Polycrates. The crux of the problem is the meaning of *geneê* which points in two different directions: *geneê* can refer to a 'race' or 'a kind', which has instigated most translators, including Williams, to render Herodotus' words into something along the lines of 'what is called the human race'.[24] At the same time, it can also denote a timespan, such as 'an age' or 'a generation', which allows for the passage in question to be rendered as 'in ordinary human history'.[25] This difference seems to change what is at stake in the figure of Minos. Once it is a categorial or qualitative difference that sets him apart from Polycrates; once they seem to be differentiated by time.

Williams dismisses the alternate translation on the grounds that the temporal meanings of *geneê* featured elsewhere in the *Histories* do not seem to fit here.[26] He thus bypasses the difficult stance towards myth and history in Herodotus (see below) and foregrounds the contribution of Thucydides to the writing of the past. In doing so, he follows a long and well-established explanatory pattern which sets Herodotus and Thucydides against each other and elevates the latter over the former in larger narratives about the history of historiography.[27] Williams's quick dismissal of the alternate translation of the passage—which renders the relevant words as 'in ordinary human history'—is all the more problematic because it would seem to support the opposite conclusion: that Herodotus already started to separate an earlier, mythical time from a later historical time.

There is, however, also a third option that has not been considered until relatively recently. Some classical scholars have found such a polarising reading of Herodotus' Minos passage unnecessarily reductive and limiting. The possibility has been raised that this could be another instance in which Herodotus deliberately employs vague and ambiguous phrasing to make his reader consider what is at stake in the ambiguities pertaining to the figure of Minos: 'elsewhere too Herodotus' presentation sensitizes readers to the difficult question of whether the difference between mythical figures and individuals of recent history—between Minos and Polycrates—is purely temporal, or whether it runs deeper than that; or, indeed, whether we simply cannot know.'[28] In other words: a deliberately ambiguous phrasing (allowing for a reading of the passage as articulating both a difference of time and in category) would be in line with strategies

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[23] References to Hulme and Hobbes: Williams (n. 1), 151–2. Hobbes like Williams elevated Thucydides over Herodotus in terms of reliability: see N. Morley, 'The anti-Thucydides: Herodotus and the development of modern historiography', in J. Priestley and V. Zali (edd.), *Brill's Companion to the Reception of Herodotus in Antiquity and Beyond* (Leiden, 2016), 143–66, at 147.

[24] See also D. Grene (transl.), *Herodotus. The History* (Chicago, 1987) ('first of the human race'); R. Waterfield (transl.), *Herodotus. The Histories* (Oxford, 1987) ('first member of what we recognize as the human race'). See also R.V. Munson, 'Herodotus and the heroic age: the case of Minos', in E. Baragwanath and M. de Bakker (edd.), *Myth, Truth, and Narrative in Herodotus* (Oxford, 2012), 195–212, at 196–7. See also T. Harrison, *Divinity and History. The Religion of Herodotus* (Oxford, 2000), 203–5 (with further scholarship in n. 86).

[25] Thus A. de Sélincourt (transl.), *Herodotus. The Histories* (Harmondsworth, 1954), left unchanged in subsequent revisions. See also R. Thomas, *Herodotus in Context. Ethnography, Science and the Art of Persuasion* (Cambridge, 2000), 266 who translates 'but of the so-called human generation' and Cobet (n. 8), 407 who has 'within the so-called human generation'.

[26] See Williams (n. 1), 155.

[27] On this tradition see Morley (n. 23) and the chapters collected in E. Foster and D. Lateiner (edd.), *Thucydides and Herodotus* (Oxford, 2012).

[28] Baragwanath and De Bakker (n. 18), 25.

Herodotus employs elsewhere to engage an active reader and to enlist them in his efforts of sense-making. This is also the reading which modern translators seem to have favoured for some time when they render the relevant phrase as implying a qualitative and temporal difference between Minos and Polycrates.[29]

4. MYTH AND HISTORY IN HERODOTUS' *HISTORIES*

Minos is a minor figure in both Herodotus and Thucydides;[30] yet much rests on him in Williams's account. He serves as the paradigmatic example that shows that Thucydides 'invented historical time' and, in doing so, initiated 'a shift in conceptions of what it is to tell the truth about the past'.[31] As Williams puts it, 'there is an intimate relation between historical time and the idea of historical truth. To say that a statement about an event is historically true is to imply that it is determinately located in the temporal structure.'[32] By assigning all events a fixed chronological place, Thucydides, according to Williams, cemented not only the distinction between myth and history; he also shaped our understanding of what it means to give a true account about the past. Both developments are connected because the question of the truth of certain events applies to history differently from its application to myth.

That Herodotus' position on myth and history—and thus, by extension, on truth and falsehood—is more complex becomes evident if we consider several other passages from the *Histories* which can be brought to bear on the matter. Among them is, for example, the detailed account about the origins of the armed conflict between Greeks and non-Greeks that Herodotus gives in the beginning of the *Histories*.[33] He dismisses the Persian and Phoenician accounts that found the origins of the conflict in old legends about the mutual abduction of Helen, Io and other women—only to start with Croesus, the king of Lydia as the first historical figure of whom he himself had knowledge.[34]

ταῦτα μέν νυν Πέρσαι τε καὶ Φοίνικες λέγουσι. ἐγὼ δὲ περὶ μὲν τούτων οὐκ ἔρχομαι ἐρέων ὡς οὕτω ἢ ἄλλως κως ταῦτα ἐγένετο, τὸν δὲ οἶδα αὐτὸς πρῶτον ὑπάρξαντα ἀδίκων ἔργων ἐς τοὺς Ἕλληνας . . .[35]

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[29] R. Strassler (ed., transl. A.L. Purvis, intr. R. Thomas), *The Landmark Herodotus. The Histories* (Cambridge, MA, 2009), 264 has 'in what is told about the human race' with the corresponding note declaring that 'by "the human race", Herodotus means the historical period rather than mythical times'. T. Holland (intr. P. Cartledge), *The Histories. Herodotus* (London, 2014) translates 'the first of what we would term the fully mortal race of men', pointing to a footnote by Cartledge which suggests that Herodotus 'here divides up the past into two great tranches—the mortal—i.e. the non-mythical and empirically verifiable—and the mythical' (page 666, n. 84). Both translators/commentators thus take the categorical argument to also include a temporal one; both take the passage as evidence that Herodotus sought to distinguish myth from history.

[30] On Minos see also Hdt. 1.171, 1.173, 7.170. In Thucydides, Minos features in 1.4, 1.8.2–3. See E. Irwin, 'Herodotus and Samos: personal or political?', *CW* 102 (2009), 395–416 on how Minos fits into the larger account of Samos of both Herodotus and Thucydides.

[31] See Williams (n. 1), 162 and 154 respectively.

[32] Williams (n. 1), 162–3. It does not follow that myth should be characterized as being outside of such temporal structures. After all, many myths are at least partially grounded in past reality. Burkert's influential definition of myth as 'a traditional story with something of collective significance' (W. Burkert, *Structure and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual* [Berkeley, 1979], 23), for example, does not make any reference to the question of veracity.

[33] Hdt. 1.1–5. On Herodotus' self-representation in the proem see M. Węcowski, 'The hedgehog and the fox: form and meaning in the prologue of Herodotus', *JHS* 124 (2004), 143–64.

[34] See Hdt. 1.1–6, with Croesus being introduced in 1.7.

[35] Hdt. 1.5.

This is what the Persians and Phoenicians say. For my own part, I will not say that this or that occurred, but I myself know him well who has done unprovoked wrong to the Greeks … [36]

Based on this and similar evidence, it has often been suggested that Herodotus had no consistent concepts of myth and history; that he still saw what, from Thucydides onwards, would be separated as myth and history within a temporal continuum between an earlier and later time; and that he only separated different kinds of time according to the different degrees of the reliability of the information available to him.[37] After all, Herodotus uses the word *mythos* only twice in the *Histories*—both times in reference to unreliable information.[38] Moreover, in the passages discussed so far he does not make use of the ancient Greek word for truth (*alêtheia*) but describes truthfulness in other ways, mostly by using forms of the Greek verb for 'to be' (*einai*) or 'to become' (*gignomai*), thus establishing what one may want to call 'an ontology' of truthfulness related to notions of the real and factual. In other words: Herodotus dismissed the Persian and Phoenician accounts on the origins of the armed conflicts between Greeks and non-Greeks because they did not live up to his standards of reliability. His views do not necessarily articulate a more general distinction between myth and history.

Such arguments have rightly highlighted the inconsistent and fragmentary nature of Herodotus' take on the past. Yet one important point is often overlooked in discussions of this evidence: by distinguishing different possible starting points for his account according to the reliability of the information available—as in the example of Herodotus' account of the origins of the war—a qualitative dimension is already embedded in the temporal one just like in the passage on Minos discussed above. By separating his own account from mere hearsay, Herodotus already uses factual correspondence to distinguish between different kinds of information relating to the past.

A qualitative difference between different accounts pertaining to the past also comes to the fore in a famous section in which Herodotus criticizes Homer with the aim of distinguishing *historiê* from epic poetry.[39] Pointing to the logical inconsistencies in the traditional story about Helen's abduction to Troy, he argues that, surely, the Trojans would have given Helen up readily to avoid a war and the ultimate destruction of their city. And, surely, they would have done so no matter whether Paris liked it or not.[40]

Herodotus seeks to replace the Homeric account with a rival one. To this end, he refers to certain Egyptian priests as his source of information. Apparently, he once asked them 'whether the Greek account of the Trojan business did happen or not' (εἰ μάταιον λόγον λέγουσι οἱ Ἕλληνες τὰ περὶ Ἴλιον γενέσθαι ἢ οὔ).[41] The response consists of a bombshell claim: Helen, so the Egyptian priests, never actually made it to Troy. When the Greeks eventually took the city, they found neither Helen nor Menelaus' treasure there. Both were later located in Egypt.[42]

Again, questions of plausibility and factual correctness—what really happened as opposed to what is merely claimed to have happened—are flagged here to evaluate, and

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[36] All translations from Herodotus are grounded in Godley's from the Loeb Classical Library. I have made changes to ensure that translations reflect the language around truthfulness more literally.

[37] See e.g. K. Wesselmann, *Mythische Erzählstrukturen in Herodots* Historien (Berlin, 2011), 316–35.

[38] Hdt. 2.23 (in the context of information on the river of Ocean) and 2.45.1 (in the context of false tales about Heracles).

[39] See Hdt. 2.113–20. On Herodotus' criticism of Homer see in particular the articles collected by B. Currie on *Herodotus as a Homeric Critic*, *Histos* Suppl. 13 (2021).

[40] See Hdt. 2.120.

[41] Hdt. 2.118.

[42] The earliest account of this myth is in Stesichorus' first *Palinode*: frr. 90–1 Finglass.

ultimately dismiss, the mythical tale in favour of a more plausible historical one. The most noteworthy point of the whole passage, however, is how Herodotus accounts for the fact that Homer favoured the other variant that has Helen escape to Troy. He speculates that he knew the correct version of the story but 'rejected it as less suitable for epic poetry than the one he actually used'.[43] Again, there is more at stake here than a mere dismissal of an implausible piece of information about the deep past. This extraordinary observation conveys a bold and self-conscious understanding of the difference between the still-emerging genre of *historiê* ('critical enquiry') and that of epic poetry. It also betrays a certain take towards mythical tales that resonates with other passages in which Herodotus rationalizes stories to make them more suitable for critical enquiry.[44] Moreover, this particular story had already featured prominently in poetry—information that Herodotus suppresses here (even though he names other lyric poets elsewhere).

At the same time, both examples illustrate that Herodotus, like Thucydides, flags mythical information as categorically different from the stuff of regular *historiê* by indicating that it is based on hearsay—thus still finding a way of including it in the *Histories* without, however, vouching for its veracity. To recall: Williams highlighted how Thucydides uses this strategy in the Minos passage to include mythical information without, however, presenting it as history. But even though Herodotus does not apply this scheme in his account of Minos, there are numerous examples in which he implements exactly the same strategy.[45]

Take Herodotus' account of a local tradition about the origins of Scythia: 'The Scythians say that they are the youngest of all nations, and the following is the account they give of their origin. The first man to live in their country, which before his birth was uninhabited, was a certain Targitaus, the son of Zeus and of a daughter of the river Borysthenes—I merely repeat the tradition and do not myself believe it (ἐμοὶ μὲν οὐ πιστὰ λέγοντες, λέγουσι δ᾽ ὦν).'[46] Just like Thucydides on Minos, Herodotus here uses someone else's account to report what is said by others without having to do so in his own voice, thus separating his own authorial persona from the information presented.

Again, more is at stake here than merely the dismissal of unreliable information. By pointing to the alleged divine descent of the legendary first Scythian, Herodotus flags information that qualitatively does not fit the strict standards of critical enquiry. Like Thucydides, he includes it as a curiosity that can be told but that needs to be differentiated from real history by indicating that it is merely based on hearsay. A qualitative evaluation is again embedded in the temporal one.

We should not overstate the gulf that separates Herodotus and *historiê* from Homer and myth. Herodotus has been called 'the most Homeric' (*homêrikôtatos*) historian for a reason.[47] The *Histories* not only combined warfare and travel as the two themes that

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[43] Hdt. 2.116. On the 'untrustworthiness of epic' elsewhere in the Herodotus' account of Egypt see A. Ellis, 'Fictional truth and factual truth in Herodotus', in I. Ruffell and L.I. Hau (edd.), *Truth and History in the Ancient World. Pluralising the Past* (London, 2017), 104–29, at 109.

[44] The 'rationalizing agenda' in this passage and on other references to the Trojan War: S. Saïd, 'Herodotus and the "myth" of the Trojan War', in E. Baragwanath and M. de Bakker (edd.), *Myth, Truth, and Narrative in Herodotus* (Oxford, 2012), 87–212. For the rationalization of myth and other stories see also Hdt. 2.45.1, 2.54–7, 4.36.1, 8.8.3.

[45] See e.g. Hdt. 1.5.3–4 with Moles (n. 7), 164.

[46] Hdt. 4.5.1.

[47] See Dion. Hal. *Pomp*. 3; [Longinus], *Subl*. 13.2–3 with the articles collected in I. Matijašić (ed.), *Herodotus—The Most Homeric Historian?* (Oxford / Edmonton / Tallahassee, 2022). The relationship between Homer and Herodotus (and Thucydides): J. Marincola, 'Odysseus and the historians', *SyllClass* 18 (2007), 1–79, at 13–5; Moles (n. 7).

feature separately in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. They also include an abundance of mythical material in ways that betray his indebtedness to the oral culture of the Archaic period.[48] Due to the presence of this material, Ellis has reminded us that there are two types of narrators present in the *Histories* who differ in the truth claims they make: there is the critically-attuned, self-reflective narrator who problematizes and interrogates his sources and who makes use of a correspondence model of the truth; at the same time, there is also the omniscient narrator who draws on narrative and storytelling and who articulates more general, philosophical truths through the voice of some of his historical characters (e.g. the figures of the wise advisor).[49] Herodotus uses this second kind of narrator to bring out the general forces that shape (his) history: the rise and fall of empires, the fickleness of human fortune and the cycle of hybris and nemesis.[50] And yet, we should not make too much of his presence. As far as the first kind of narrator is concerned, the difference between Herodotus and Thucydides is smaller than Williams allows.

Williams is right to point out that Herodotus had no unified conception of a *spatium mythicum* as separate and separable from a *spatium historicum*. His attitude towards myth is inconsistent at best. And yet, the inconsistencies in Herodotus' presentation of mythical information do not mean that he was merely (in Williams's formulation) 'beginning to be anxious about' the qualitative difference that sets myth apart from history. Rather, it is evident that Herodotus is already very much involved in grappling with different kinds of information and the categories—truth and falsehood, reality and fiction, history and myth—which we have created to contain and control them.[51] There is much that recommends Cobet's suggestion that Herodotus distinguished between three different temporal entities: the historical period, the mythical period (of gods and heroes) and a space in between (sometimes called 'the floating gap' or the 'dark age') which provided the biggest challenge in that it defied the principles and practices in place to structure and organize the other two.[52]

In his discussion of Herodotus, Williams is potentially conflating two different questions: first whether Herodotus has a concept of myth as distinct from historical fact, and second, which category he applies to the description of any given event (such as the Trojan War). As far as the first question is concerned, Herodotus does have a concept of mythical narratives as being historically unreliable—Homer's version of the Trojan War being the prime example here. And yet (and that brings us to the second question) that does not mean that he classifies all events in the same way as we do. His comments on the Trojan War, for example, indicate the view that some historical facts that can be established about it. And some figures that we today would classify as 'mythical' feature in the *Histories* as (potentially) 'historical'.[53]

Returning to the discussion of the Minos passage: the additional examples brought into play above also resonate with the suggestion of Baragwanath and De Bakker

[48] Herodotus' indebtedness to oral culture and his conception of the truth: Moles (n. 7), 181–2. See Marincola (n. 47), 51–66 on truth and falsehoods in Homer's *Odyssey* and their impact on Herodotus.
[49] Ellis (n. 43).
[50] On the complex concept of hybris in the *Histories* and its link to nemesis see P. Demont, 'Hubris', in C. Baron (ed.), *The Herodotus Encyclopedia* (London, 2021), 2.711–12.
[51] Truth as a historical category in Herodotus' *Histories*: C. Darbo-Peschanski, *Le discours du particulier. Essai sur l'enquête hérodotéenne* (Paris, 1987), 25–38; Marincola (n. 47), 51–66; Moles (n. 7); Baragwanath and De Bakker (n. 18); C.C. Chiasson, 'Myth and truth in Herodotus' Cyrus logos', in E. Baragwanath and M. de Bakker (edd.), *Myth, Truth, and Narrative in Herodotus* (Oxford, 2012), 213–32; Ellis (n. 43).
[52] Cobet (n. 8), 405–11.
[53] I thank *CQ*'s reader for pointing this out to me.

(mentioned above) that the ambiguous wording of the Minos passage might be a strategy employed by Herodotus to make the reader think about such differences. While not in any way ambiguous, these examples, too, can be taken to show that Herodotus sought to engage his audience in his efforts of sense-making. In this point Herodotus differs from Thucydides, who on the whole conceals the considerations that inform his work rather than laying them out in the open.[54] Herodotus, by contrast, wrote the questions and problems he faced in establishing a true account of the past into his work. He thus makes his audience complicit in the endeavour of distinguishing fact from fiction.[55] The way in which the truth features in Herodotus' *Histories* thus resonates with Williams's view of the truth as a social and relational construct. This raises the question why Williams nevertheless favoured Thucydides over Herodotus, to which we will return.

5. TRUTH AND TRUTHFULNESS IN THE *HISTORIES*

That Herodotus already grappled with the truth as a problem becomes evident above all from numerous passages in which he, in his own voice, evaluates historical events according to their correspondence to a factual reality.[56] When he reports on the circumstances in which the Scythian prince Anacharsis came to be put to death, for example, he tells us one version but adds:

καίτοι τινὰ ἤδη ἤκουσα λόγον ἄλλον ὑπὸ Πελοποννησίων λεγόμενον [. . .]. ἀλλ᾽ οὗτος μὲν ὁ λόγος ἄλλως πέπλασται ὑπ᾽ αὐτῶν Ἑλλήνων, ὁ δ᾽ ὦν ἀνὴρ ὥσπερ πρότερον εἰρέθη διεφθάρη.

And yet, I have heard another story told by the Peloponnesians . . . But this is a tale especially invented by the Greeks themselves; and be this as it may, the man was put to death as I have said.[57]

Authorial interventions such as this are often taken as evidence that Herodotus first conceived of 'the problem of the sources'.[58] Yet more is at stake here than merely the insight that people do not always tell the truth, and that different sources of information need to be interrogated first as to their intrinsic motivations and perspectives before we can make use of them. A second example from Book 1 can help to illustrate this. Moving on from a general account of the Persian subjugation of the Lydian Empire prior to the Graeco-Persian Wars to a more specific account of the figure of Cyrus, Herodotus states:

ἐπιδίζηται δὲ δὴ τὸ ἐνθεῦτεν ἡμῖν ὁ λόγος τόν τε Κῦρον ὅστις ἐὼν τὴν Κροίσου ἀρχὴν κατεῖλε, καὶ τοὺς Πέρσας ὅτεῳ τρόπῳ ἡγήσαντο τῆς Ἀσίης. ὡς ὦν Περσέων μετεξέτεροι λέγουσι, οἱ μὴ βουλόμενοι σεμνοῦν τὰ περὶ Κῦρον, ἀλλὰ τὸν ἐόντα λέγειν λόγον, κατὰ ταῦτα γράψω, ἐπιστάμενος περὶ Κύρου καὶ τριφασίας ἄλλας λόγων ὁδοὺς φῆναι.

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[54] For Thucydides' vagueness about his methods and especially his method of selectivity see S. Hornblower, *Thucydides* (London, 1987), 42–3, 77–83 (on Thucydides' use of evidence).

[55] When Herodotus performed and composed the *Histories*, notions of factual truthfulness and authenticity only started to be applied to the writing of the past and history-telling emerged from a much broader engagement with the past in song and oral culture.

[56] See Ellis (n. 43), 105–10 for a list of examples on how the critically attuned narrator presents his own role in the generation of true knowledge.

[57] Hdt. 4.77.1.

[58] Herodotus' authorial voice: e.g. J. Marincola, *Authority and Tradition in Ancient Historiography* (Cambridge, 1997), 3–12; R. Thomas, 'Truth and authority in Herodotus' narrative: false stories and true stories', in E. Bowie (ed.), *Herodotus – Narrator, Scientist, Historian* (London, 2018), 265–84. Herodotus and the 'problem of the sources': R. Fowler, 'Herodotos and his contemporaries', *JHS* 116 (1996), 62–87, at 86.

But it is next the business of my history to inquire who Cyrus was who brought down the power of Croesus, and how the Persians came to be rulers of Asia. I mean then to be guided in what I write by some of the Persians who desire not to make a tall tale of the story of Cyrus but to give an account of the facts, though there are no less than three other accounts of Cyrus which I could give.[59]

By including such considerations about his methodology, Herodotus opens up his account to a new form of criticism: he practically conditions his audience to assess the assertions he makes for their factual correctness. Both examples show that Herodotus presented factual veracity as the yardstick against which a work of *historiê* was to be measured. He thus seeks to influence how we read and evaluate his account in ways that resonate with Williams's observations about the values that came to be associated with truth-telling: by thematizing the effort it takes to separate fact from fiction, to establish true information about past and present events, Herodotus foregrounds one of the two values that Williams named as essential to concepts of truth and truthfulness: that of accuracy.[60]

Whether he always really aimed to deliver—not to mention whether he did indeed deliver on this promise—is a different matter. After all, this is the author who has us believe in gold-digging ants, floating islands and other fantastic tales.[61] But to recognize that Herodotus himself inscribed a framework for evaluating *historiê* according to the factual into his account is invariably revealing, not least because it shows that he himself was repeatedly subjected to the very mode of criticism that he prompted in the first instance.[62]

So much for accuracy. What about the second value that Williams names as central to truth-telling, sincerity?[63] Plenty of evidence shows that whenever Herodotus noticed that he would fall short in his pursuit for accuracy, he at least aimed for sincerity. A powerful example comes from Book 2, where Herodotus discusses the limits of the information available to him about the remoter parts of Egypt. Right after his discussion of the river Nile he states:

τοσόνδε μὲν ἄλλο ἐπὶ μακρότατον ἐπυθόμην, μέχρι μὲν Ἐλεφαντίνης πόλιος αὐτόπτης ἐλθών, τὸ δ᾽ ἀπὸ τούτου ἀκοῇ ἤδη ἱστορέων. ἀπὸ Ἐλεφαντίνης πόλιος ἄνω ἰόντι ἄναντές ἐστι χωρίον.

This much I learnt by the farthest inquiry that I could make, by my own travel and sight as far as the city of Elephantine, and beyond that by question and hearsay. Beyond Elephantine, as one travels inland, the land rises.[64]

Herodotus acknowledges that he is unable to provide factual evidence based on autopsy beyond a certain geographical point.[65] As accuracy seems out of reach, he at least goes for sincerity. Only a highly cynical reading of this and other similar passages would

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[59] Hdt. 1.95.1.

[60] Williams (n. 1), 127 defines accuracy as implying 'the notion of effective investigation' and adds that 'this itself implies that there is a genuine property which some methods of inquiry have and some others lack, the property of leading to true belief'.

[61] See respectively Hdt. 3.102, 2.156.

[62] On the ancient and modern reception of Herodotus see J. Priestley and V. Zali (edd.), *Brill's Companion to the Reception of Herodotus in Antiquity and Beyond* (Leiden, 2016).

[63] Williams defines sincerity as follows: 'Sincerity consists in a disposition to make sure that one's assertion expresses what one actually believes.' In this definition sincerity does not necessarily result in the conveying of true information as it allows for false beliefs to result in wrong information.

[64] Hdt. 2.29.1–2.

[65] The status of autopsy in relation to other forms of knowledge in Herodotus and other ancient historians: Marincola (n. 58), 63–86.

suggest that Herodotus here admits to a possible weakness in his account to make up for the more substantial fact that the whole passage was made up.[66] But even if he did indeed fabricate the whole passage, it would not change how sincerity here is presented as a virtue that goes together with accuracy in supporting the search for true information.[67]

In sum, then, no matter whether Herodotus always succeeded in providing his audience with the factual truth—and he clearly did not, he already conceived of the truth as a problem. And, in response to it, he grappled with the two values that Williams names as central to the emergence of the truth and truthfulness as critical concepts: accuracy and sincerity. This matters because it shows that ideas of truth and truthfulness relating to the writing of the past did not just result from the separation of myth and history, as Williams implied when he attributed Thucydides with the invention of historical time and with making a new start in conceiving of the truth. Rather, the way in which myth and history feature in the *Histories* illustrates that such conceptions were actively involved in shaping an understanding of what sets myth apart from history.

6. TRUTH TELLING AS A CULTURAL AND SOCIAL VALUE

Engaging with Williams's conception of truth encourages us not only to appreciate how Herodotus grappled with questions of sincerity and accuracy; it also helps us to see how truth is represented as an intrinsically social value that serves a certain purpose. This is because Herodotus did not just struggle to separate the factual from the fictional in his own voice and in the form of direct authorial interventions like in the examples discussed above. In the *Histories*, the questions and problems pertaining to the truth and truthfulness feature more widely. Several of Herodotus' stories revolve around the telling of the truth or problematize the fallout from the telling of lies. In addition, truth-telling also features in some of Herodotus' ethnographic passages. These stories and passages reverberate with each other through various themes and other cross-references; taken together they present the truth as a social value and explore the kind of conditions that further—or hinder—truth-speaking.

Incidentally, the most explicit evocation of truthfulness as a social value occurs in the context of Herodotus' ethnographic sections. He tells us that the Persians instruct their children in three primary domains: horse-riding (*hippeuein*), archery (*toxeuein*) and truth-telling (*alêthizesthai*).[68] If this combination of two highly practical skills with the much more abstract and indeterminate truth-telling may, at first, seem surprising, Herodotus is quick to offer more detail: apparently, the Persians associate lying with being in debt on the grounds that being a debtor often involves the telling of lies.[69] This observation stands out because it places truth-telling at the core of exactly the kind of reciprocal relations that make up society in which Williams is interested. Truth-telling here features as a force that works in support of the restoration of balance (a principle that deeply

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[66] D. Fehling (transl. J.G. Howie), *Herodotus and His 'Sources'. Citation, Invention and Narrative Art* (Leeds, 1989 [1971]), 100–1 considers this passage to be articulating a falsehood. But even Fehling acknowledges that Herodotus here strove for credibility. He just does not believe in the sincerity of Herodotus' claim of autopsy but dismisses it as a literary trope.

[67] There are numerous similar examples in the *Histories*; see e.g. 9.84, where Herodotus firmly states that Mardonius' body was buried but adds that he cannot say by whom due to the fact that several people claimed to have done so.

[68] Hdt. 1.136.

[69] Hdt. 1.138.

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pervades the world Herodotus created in the *Histories*).[70] The evasion of repaying debt
by lying, by contrast, constitutes a way of preventing the restoration of a balance—here,
quite literally the settling of a monetary balance—hence unsettling the social order.[71]

And yet, a quick look at other sections from the *Histories* reveals that even though
some Persian kings (such as Cambyses and Xerxes) show an almost 'childlike and
perverse devotion to truth', others do not always seem to deliver on what they are
taught.[72] This becomes evident above all in a passage in which Darius (who was from an
influential Persian family of high social standing and soon to become king over Persia)
converses with Otanes on how to get into to the royal palace in order to oust one of the
Magoi who was posing as the rightful king. Darius dismisses Otanes' concerns about the
difficulties of accessing the royal quarters by advising him that he will simply tell the
guards that he has an important message from his father to deliver. What follows next is
even more remarkable. To justify this brazen use of a strategic lie, Darius offers nothing
short of a general theory of the truth which stands in sharp contrast to truth-telling as a
fundamental Persian value.

ἔνθα γάρ τι δεῖ ψεῦδος λέγεσθαι, λεγέσθω. τοῦ γὰρ αὐτοῦ γλιχόμεθα οἵ τε ψευδόμενοι καὶ οἱ
τῇ ἀληθείῃ διαχρεώμενοι. οἳ μέν γε ψεύδονται τότε ἐπεάν τι μέλλωσι τοῖσι ψεύδεσι
πείσαντες κερδήσεσθαι, οἳ δ᾽ ἀληθίζονται ἵνα τῇ ἀληθείῃ ἐπισπάσωνται κέρδος καί τι
μᾶλλόν σφι ἐπιτράπηται. οὕτω οὐ ταὐτὰ ἀσκέοντες τὠυτοῦ περιεχόμεθα. εἰ δὲ μηδὲν
κερδήσεσθαι μέλλοιεν, ὁμοίως ἂν ὅ τε ἀληθιζόμενος ψευδὴς εἴη καὶ ὁ ψευδόμενος ἀληθής.

Let lies be told where they are needful. All of us aim at the like end whether we lie or speak truth;
he that lies does it to win credence and so advantage by his deceit, and he that speaks truth hopes
that truth will get him profit and greater trust; so we do but take different ways to the same goal.
Were the hope of advantage taken away, the truthteller were as ready to lie as the liar to speak
truth.[73]

Truth-telling here features as a strategy that may be adopted—or dismissed—at will by
individuals depending on their individual aims and objectives. Truth-telling here lacks
any intrinsic social or moral value; it is presented merely as a tool towards a certain end.
And yet, this instrumental take only works against the background of a society in which
truthfulness is of general value. To turn the truth-based social relationships to one's own
advantage by telling a lie, these relationships need to be in place in the first instance. If
everybody shared the same attitude towards the truth, this strategy would not work. A
more complex and conflicted picture of truth-speaking emerges than the simple
observation on Persian educational values suggested.

Questions of truth-telling and lying also feature in Herodotus' account of the birth of
baby Cyrus and the failed attempts of his grandfather, Astyages, to have the infant killed
due to several adverse prophetic dreams.[74] The two people who are subsequently asked to
carry out this cruel task, one Harpagus (a Median noble who served the king as a member
of the royal household) and a cowherd, both, one after another, fail to do so. The former

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[70] Balance and imbalance in the *Histories*: H.R. Immerwahr, *Form and Thought in Herodotus*
(Cleveland, OH, 1966), 50, 152–4, 172, 312–14.
[71] This does not mean that there is also an appreciation for what T. Harrison ('Truth and lies in
Herodotus' *Histories*', in V. Karageorghis and I. Taifacos [edd.], *The World of Herodotus* [Nicosia,
2004], 255–62, at 257) refers to as 'Odyssean tricksterishness' as evident, for example, in Herodotus'
depiction of Darius.
[72] Harrison (n. 71), 257.
[73] Hdt. 3.72.4−5.
[74] Here and below see Hdt. 1.107–19.

does so out of pity for the child, the latter at least partly for personal reasons (the cowherd raises the baby as his own, thus replacing a stillborn child).

Years later, when the boy is ten years old the whole charade comes out and the two men are confronted by Astyages. The cowherd at first tells Astyages a lie but—when threatened with physical violence—reveals the truth. Harpagus is summoned too. When he sees the cowherd, he immediately relates what really happened. And yet while the cowherd is dismissed despite his initial lie, Harpagus pays dearly for not following the king's orders: Astyages serves him his own son's flesh which he unknowingly consumes.

In telling this story Herodotus follows an already well-established story-pattern, revolving around the exposure of a newborn, its survival against the odds, and the later recognition of the grown child's true identity.[75] Cyrus, this story shows, was lucky to survive infancy and his maternal grandfather Astyages was an extraordinarily cruel man who did not shy away from violent actions even against members of his own family and entourage. And yet, given the way in which this story is set up in Herodotus, it is difficult not to read this also as a story about the kind of social conditions and power relationships that further openness and truth-telling, and those that lead to its opposite: deception and the telling of lies. In this light, the story shows that even regal power does not guarantee obedience if an immoral request is made; moreover, the relationship between Astyages and Harpagus was obviously not of a kind that the latter was comfortable to decline or question the king's orders to expose the boy. When confronted by the king, the cowherd at first utters a strategic lie, but is forced to reveal the truth when threatened with physical violence. All this puts the spotlight on a milieu in which the abuse of power leads to the betrayal of trust, to lies (even by those considered close followers) and brutal acts of violence. That all this unfolds among the movers and shakers of the Persian empire is no coincidence. As Harrison observed, 'with its lack of opportunity for frank speaking, clearly the Persian court breeds slander.'[76] Herodotus makes us think about the kind of social conditions that result in lies and deceit.

Yet not all stories relating to the question of truth and truthfulness are situated in Persia. More than once, the Athenians also fall for lies and deceit.[77] Moreover, we already saw at play the link between truth-telling, debt and questions of justice in the ethnographic account of Persian customs. It features again and much closer to home: it is at the core of a story that the Spartan king Leotychides tells the Athenians when they refuse to return certain hostages that had been entrusted to them earlier.[78] Apparently, one Glaucus, a Spartan man with a reputation for justice (*dikaiosynê*), was once asked by a man from Miletus to take on half of the man's wealth for safekeeping. When Glaucus agrees, the man hands over some tokens and advises Glaucus to release the money to whoever has the matching tokens. Many years later, the sons of the Milesian return to Sparta, produce the tokens and request the return of their father's funds.

But Glaucus feigns total ignorance: 'I have no remembrance [. . .] of the matter, nor am I moved to any knowledge of that whereof you speak; let me bring it to mind, and I will do all that is just (*dikaios*); if I took the money I will duly restore it, and if I never took it at all I will deal with you according to the customs of the Greeks.'[79] Again, as in the case of Otanes, Glaucus' lies only work against the background of truth-telling as a

[75] On this story pattern see e.g. P.J. Finglass, *Sophocles. Oedipus the King* (Cambridge, 2018), 63–70 (on 'foundling narratives'), 49 (with reference to Cyrus).

[76] Harrison (n. 71), 257.

[77] See Harrison (n. 71), 259, with examples.

[78] See Hdt. 6.86.

[79] Hdt. 6.86.2.

social convention. Glaucus himself directly references truth-telling as a value when he claims that he would, of course, readily restore the money if only he remembered having accepted it from the men's father in the first instance. By being willing to swear a false oath, his words lack not only accuracy, but also, and above the second value that Williams associates with the truth, that of sincerity.

With the oath and the tokens, the focus of the story turns to the social and religious tools and institutions by which the ancient Greeks sought to ensure that the truth prevailed and that promises once made were indeed followed through later. Yet despite such attempts, it is ultimately the gods who maintain the good order. Glaucus paid dearly for his insincerity, thus turning the story into a parable of what happens if humans seek to enlist the gods in their wrongful actions. Apparently, the Delphic Oracle dismissed Glaucus' request to keep the money by swearing a false oath and by pointing out that Glaucus' family had died out from present-day Sparta.

There are numerous further passages related to truth-telling that could be brought into the picture here.[80] They resonate with the examples discussed here through recurrent themes and story-patterns. Alas, the larger principle has already become clear: Herodotus obviously explored the kind of conditions that further truth-telling as well as the motivations that lead to the telling of lies. These stories reverberate with the way in which the truth features in some of Herodotus' authorial interventions. Here, too, truthfulness features as a bond that puts the spotlight on the relationships and power dynamics between different kinds of people.

7. GENEALOGY AND HISTORY

In this last section, we return once again to Williams's use of the classical past more generally to enquire about what kind of considerations drive his understanding of Herodotus and Thucydides. Williams's reading of early Greek historiography is influenced by how he sees the 'state of nature story' and 'history' come together under the umbrella of genealogy. In his view, the 'state of nature story' offers merely an incomplete and abstract account of the origins of truth and truthfulness; to unfold its full explanatory potential, genealogy ultimately must extend into the realm of history.[81]

Williams gives three reasons for why this is the case. First, because only history can reveal the kind of motivations that sustain the commitment to truthfulness at a particular point in time.[82] Williams here points to particular 'values' and 'attitudes' that underpin the truth as a social, cultural and historical conception. Second, because history picks up from and advances the 'state of nature story' by revealing how notions of truth and truthfulness adopted their claim to universality and thus evolved from a local to a universal conception.[83] And third, because the 'state of nature story' points to the truth only in abstract and rudimentary terms, whereas history provides a richer account of the forms and formulations that the truth adopts at any particular place and time. All three

[80] Further passages that thematize the truth (or its absence): e.g. Hdt. 1.30, 2.106, 3.17, 3.27–8, 3.66–7, 7.9, 7.234, 8.8.
[81] See e.g. Williams (n. 1), 20–2 and, in particular, 38–40. The 'state of nature story' offers a 'cumulative' and 'fictional' account of truth as a general human value. As such it both precedes and supplements the historical account which provides insights into the specific historical circumstances and 'motivations' that drive the emergence of notions of truth and truthfulness in a particular time and place. Both perspectives come together in genealogy.
[82] See Williams (n. 1), 39–40.
[83] Williams (n. 1), 40.

reasons revolve around essentially the same point: on its own, the 'state of nature story' provides little more than abstract speculations of the evolutionary advantages that a conception of the truth holds for a social and cooperative species such as the human. To come to life in actuality, it has to be sustained by what Williams refers to as 'real history'.[84]

Among these three reasons, it is the second one that is most directly relevant to Williams's reading of ancient Greek history. Pointing forward to the chapter on Minos, Williams states:

cultural developments *extend* what is offered in the imaginary genealogy [. . .]. The example is a certain conception of telling the truth about the past, and in chapter 7 [the chapter on Minos] I shall try to explain what this local conception was like, and also how at a given historical juncture it was replaced by another conception, which is the one that we now have.[85]

Williams thus focusses on Herodotus and Thucydides to illustrate how the genealogical explanation of the truth extends from the 'state of nature story' into the realm of history. To understand how historiography moved on from 'local' (and thus much more limited) conceptions of historical truth to 'objective' history, Williams will look at the particular point in time at which this transition occurred.

In light of these considerations, it becomes clear that Williams takes the differences between Herodotus and Thucydides to represent the 'historical juncture' mentioned in the statement just discussed.[86] In this point, Williams's genealogical project aligns with the 'developmental model' that dominated older classical scholarship on the history of historiography well into the twentieth century.[87] This model was driven by a strong teleological thrust and a focus on progress. It typically cast Thucydides as representing modern principles and practices of history-writing and used his stance to critique (and ultimately degrade) Herodotus' position.[88] The same stance is at play in Williams's assertion that Thucydides' conception of myth is practically ours and that Herodotus was not quite there yet in terms of separating myth from history.

Yet the problem of both genealogy and developmental models of historiography is that they are necessarily and invariably simplifying. Williams overstates the difference between Herodotus and Thucydides. The latter prominently dismisses a mythical element (*to mythôdes*) in the beginning of his work.[89] But so does Herodotus. He also begins his work with a partial rejection of tall tales and rebuffs what he considers to be mythical tales. As shown above, myth and storytelling more generally form one of the realms in which Herodotus explores questions of truth and truthfulness. Williams does not consider the full extent to which Herodotus grapples with these issues and the values associated with them. In effect, he simplifies the complex relationship between Herodotus and Thucydides and their respective conceptions of truth and truthfulness to make it reflect the transformative moment in the history of ideas that illustrates the transition from local to universal conceptions of the truth.

[84] Genealogy and 'real history': Williams (n. 1), 39, 151.

[85] Williams (n. 1), 40.

[86] In doing so he follows a sustained scholarly tradition which seeks to represent Herodotus and Thucydides as two antithetic poles in larger narratives about the history of historiography. See Morley (n. 23), and Foster and Lateiner (n. 27).

[87] The 'developmental model' in the study of the history of historiography: Morley (n. 23), 155–9.

[88] Morley (n. 23), 159.

[89] Thuc. 1.21.1. Marincola (n. 58), 117–27 shows that despite this juncture, myth retained an important (but contested) place in the later Graeco-Roman historiographic tradition.

This is not merely a lapse of judgement on Williams's part; rather, it is representative of how the classical past features in genealogical accounts more generally. This is because, as a form of critique, the genealogical stance comes with considerable baggage. No matter whether we look at Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals* or Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, genealogy always and inevitably includes a strong forward-facing evolutionary momentum and considers the past from the point of view of the later tradition.[90]

In *Unthinking the Greek Polis*, Vlassopoulos has criticized this perspective by linking it to a form of Occidentalism that articulated itself above all in 'the ideology that there exist clearly bounded entities in world history, such as the West [. . .], and that these metaphysical entities have a genealogy (or rather only the Occident has a true genealogy)'.[91] Key here is the notion of evolutionism, or progress—the idea that the history of ideas started in the ancient world and, through a succession of steps or stages, ultimately culminated in Western liberal democracy and the logocentric positions underpinning it.

In such genealogies, the Graeco-Roman past is typically attributed with a particular role: that of a nucleus or 'seedling'. The history of the ancient world is typically cast as a history of origins, and the end or destination—present-day Western conceptions of truth and truthfulness—is always already implied in the beginning. Genealogical accounts thus foreground those aspects of ancient thought that have influenced later ideas and conceptions. What is mostly lost in this perspective is a more nuanced analysis of the wider contemporary contexts in which ancient ideas emerged, of the social, political and intellectual forces that shaped them and of the ways in which they circulated in different areas of life. Moreover, evolutionism does not usually account for the fact that history rarely, if ever, evolves in such straight lines. The history of ideas, in particular, is an invariably messy affair. More often than not, it leaps back and forth, looks for inspiration sideways—and finds it in unexpected places. And, more than once, it has reverted to long-refuted positions.

Williams's reading of the ancient evidence is typical of the genealogical stance and its problematic take on history. Here, too, the destination (or endpoint) of the story shapes its very beginning. Williams ascribes a conception of veracity to Thucydides that is in effect the one that is still applied to works of history today.[92] Herodotus, by contrast, is taken to represent an earlier, more limited and more primitive conception of the truth that is 'local' in that it does not seem to separate myth from history, fact from fiction. Neither description really reflects the complicated stance towards the truth and matters of truthfulness in and of either author—not to mention the complex relationship between them and other contemporary authors.[93] Thucydides' conception of the truth (as it applies to history) is not yet ours, and Herodotus' is more nuanced than Williams makes it out to be.

8. CONCLUSION

Williams's genealogical account seems ultimately unable to capture the complex ways in which early Greek historiography grappled with questions of truth and truthfulness. Yet it would be wrong to conclude that he has nothing to offer to the student of the ancient

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[90] F. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals. A Polemic* (New York, 2014; German original 1887); M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 4 vols. (New York, 2019–23; French original 1976–2018).
[91] K. Vlassopoulos, *Unthinking the Greek Polis* (Cambridge, 2007), 1.
[92] Williams (n. 1), 40.
[93] The intellectual milieu of Herodotus: Thomas (n. 22).

world. A perspective emerges from Williams's account that resonates with the ancient evidence: that of the truth as a social and interactive relational value.

As we have seen, Herodotus' *Histories* problematize the truth in different ways. To understand the meaning and status of truthfulness in his work and how it sits in the Western history of ideas we need to move beyond modern notions of truthfulness. In other words, rather than asking whether Herodotus in the *Histories* got his facts right or not, it seems more productive to ask what the truth did for Herodotus, how it allowed him to relate to his audience and how it features in the interactions of some of his historical characters. A similar perspective can be productively applied to Thucydides and his more authorial stance towards the past.

With its focus on the interactive nature of truth and the social values associated with truthfulness as a relational concept, Williams's study points to the possibility of such a change in focus but does not itself apply it to the reading of early Greek historiography. And yet thanks to his work, the question of truthfulness in early Greek thought and literature is re-framed. A more dynamic set of questions opens up a variety of new avenues of enquiry, focussed on the relationships between author and audience, and between individual historical characters.

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