

Herodotus and Thucydides: Inventing History

Herodotus wrote about the wars between Persia and Greece. Thucydides wrote about the civil war between Athens and Sparta. Together these ancient Greek writers became the first true historians in Western civilization.

Herodotus and The Histories

We know little about the personal life of Herodotus. He was born around 485 B.C. in Halicarnassus, a city settled by Greeks on the western coast of Asia Minor (today's Turkey). His family was probably aristocratic and wealthy. When he was a youngster, Herodotus and his family fled Halicarnassus after backing an unsuccessful revolt against the tyrant who ruled the city.

As a young man, Herodotus traveled widely, perhaps as a merchant. He visited Greek colonies along the northern coast of the Black Sea. He ventured into Eastern Europe where a nomadic people called Scythians lived. He spent a lot of time exploring Egypt. He toured the lands of the eastern Mediterranean, and maybe the city of Babylon in Mesopotamia (now Iraq). Herodotus was curious and learned everything he could about the non-Greek world.

At about age 35, Herodotus settled in Athens. For many years, he had been writing an account of the wars between Greece and Persia, which had ended when he was a small child. Herodotus entertained Athenians and other Greeks by reading parts of his work for a fee.

He did not finish his life's work until he moved to Thurii, a Greek colony in southern Italy. The book is today known as *The Histories*. It was first "published" on papyrus scrolls in Athens, probably in a series, starting around 430 B.C. Herodotus died in Thurii about 425 B.C.

He wrote *The Histories* in prose. Centuries earlier, Homer had used poetry to write *The Iliad*, which is about the Trojan Wars. No Greek had ever written a long narration of past events in prose.

Herodotus probably started writing intending just to cover the two Persian Wars. When he finished, however, he had added huge amounts of background material that filled the first half of *The Histories*.

Herodotus traced the conquests of Cyrus, Cambyses, and Darius, who made the Persian Empire the dominant power in the "inhabited world." He also wrote about the cultures, stories, and legends of the numerous peoples who made up the Persian Empire. Herodotus decided not to leave out anything he had learned about these foreign lands and peoples.

Herodotus pioneered many methods and sources that historians use today. He depended heavily on his own observations from his extensive travels. He also interviewed individual Greeks, Persians, and others.

Herodotus' writing was not always reliable. He did not rigorously separate fact from fiction as modern historians try to do. He also composed long speeches, most of which had never been actually spoken. But Herodotus presented a balanced picture of the Greeks and Persians at war. Remarkably, much of his account was from the Persian point of view. Although he wrote about oracles and dreams influencing men, he did not put the gods in the middle of the action as Homer had done.

Herodotus and the First Persian War

In the first sentence of *The Histories*, Herodotus explained why he wrote his monumental work:

Herodotus of Halicarnassus here presents his research so that human events do not fade with time. May the great and wonderful deeds—some brought forth by the Hellenes [Greeks], others by the barbarians [Persians]—not go unsung; as well as the causes that led them to make war on each other.

Early in *The Histories*, Herodotus told the story of King Croesus of Lydia in the western part of Asia Minor. Known for his vast riches, Croesus learned of an oracle who predicted he would destroy a great empire. This emboldened him to attack the Persians to the east. The Persian King Cyrus crushed his army and conquered Lydia. Only then did Croesus realize that the empire he would destroy was his own. Herodotus thus set the stage for the fall of great men who came too close to thinking of themselves as all-powerful gods.

Herodotus described a remarkable scene in Persian history following the sudden death of King Cambyses. Persian nobles debated whether they should continue the monarchy (rule by a king), or adopt a democracy (rule by the many) or an oligarchy (rule by the few). The noble Darius reminded his countrymen that King Cyrus had alone made the decisions that created the Persian Empire. This argument convinced the nobles to stay with a monarchy. They also agreed to make Darius the new king.

Herodotus told how Darius reorganized and expanded the Persian Empire so that it reached from western India in Asia to Thrace, north of Greece, in Europe. The Greeks, he wrote, spoke of Darius as the “Great King.”

Greece comprised many city-states. The most important were Athens, a democracy, and Sparta, an oligarchy. These city-states were not unified and thus were in danger if King Darius ever decided to conquer Greece.

In 499 B.C., with the help of Athens, Greek colonies along the west coast of Asia Minor revolted against Persian rule. Darius easily crushed the revolt. He then retaliated against Athens by mounting a massive seaborne invasion of Greece in 490 B.C. The Athenians with a few allies defeated Darius at the battle of Marathon. Herodotus described how the Athenians finally won:

In their victory there, they allowed the barbarian troops that they had routed to flee and then . . . as the Persians fled, the Athenians pursued them and cut them down until they reached the sea, where they called for fire and started to seize the [Persian] ships.

“Great King” Darius returned to Persia, vowing to come back to Greece, but he died before he could lead another invasion. His son, Xerxes, succeeded him in 486 B.C.

Herodotus and the Second Persian War

A few years after Darius died, Xerxes decided to lead a second invasion of Greece. Herodotus quoted a long speech Xerxes made to the Persian nobles, stating his reasons and intentions. This speech, like others that Herodotus quoted in *The Histories*, probably never took place. He did, however, interview a number of Persians and probably captured the thinking of Xerxes, as indicated in this excerpt from Xerxes’ speech:

Persians, I am not about to introduce a new custom to you, instead I shall follow the tradition handed down to me. . . I was struck by the realization that we could gain glory; take possession of lands fully as extensive, productive, and fertile as those which we have now; and at the same time obtain vengeance and retribution, too. . . [I] shall not give up until I conquer Athens and set it on fire, since it is they who began the offenses against me and my father. . .

In 480 B.C., Xerxes led the largest army the world had ever seen across a pontoon bridge over the Hellespont, a narrow strait between Asia Minor and Europe. He also assembled a navy that consisted of war ships from subject states.

As the massive army and navy moved toward Athens, 300 Spartans held a key pass in the mountains at Thermopylae. Xerxes asked an exiled Spartan if his countrymen would fight the overwhelming Persian army. Herodotus quoted the Spartan’s reply:

For though they are free, they are not free in all respects, for they are actually ruled by a lord and master: law is that master, and it is the law that they inwardly fear—much more so than your men fear you. They do whatever it commands, which is always the same: It forbids them to flee from battle, and no matter how many men they are fighting, it orders them to remain in their rank or perish.

Xerxes laughed at this, wrote Herodotus, but was stunned when the 300 Spartans repelled three assaults by his army. The Spartans were defeated only after a Greek betrayed them by showing the Persians a concealed path through the mountains.

Herodotus wrote that as Xerxes then marched toward Athens, the citizens debated the meaning of an oracle, predicting “wooden walls” would save the city. The Athenian leader Themistocles persuaded the others that this meant the Athenians should fight at sea with their wooden ships.

The Athenian navy destroyed the Persian fleet as Xerxes looked on in horror. The Spartans went on to win a great land victory over the Persian army, forcing it to march back across the pontoon bridge to Persia, never to return

Thucydides and The History of the Peloponnesian War

After the defeat of Xerxes, many Greek city-states joined a league, headed by Athens with its superior navy, to defend Greece from any further Persian invasions. Athens, however, began to demand tribute—money, soldiers, or warships—from league members. In addition, Athens forced other city-states to join the league and prevented any member from leaving it. It also pressured league cities to adopt a democratic government like its own.

The combination of tribute and expanded trade created a wealthy Athenian Empire. This, in turn, enabled Pericles, the leader of the Athenian democracy, to launch a major building program in the city. One of his projects included the famous Parthenon, a temple to the goddess Athena. Pericles admitted that the Athenian Empire was a tyranny but argued the benefits it brought to Athens outweighed its evils.

Meanwhile, the Spartans with their dominant land army withdrew to their homeland of Peloponnesus, a wide peninsula connected to the Greek mainland by a narrow strip of land.

Sparta differed greatly from Athens. It was a regimented, militaristic society. All Spartan males, ages 20–60, were soldiers. Women and slaves performed most other tasks in Sparta. Its government was an oligarchy, drawn from the professional warrior class.

As Athens gathered more Greek city-states into its empire, the Spartans began to view the Athenians as a threat. Sparta formed its own defensive league, and before long sporadic fighting broke out with Athens and its allies. A peace treaty between Athens and Sparta did not last long, and in 431 B.C. the Peloponnesian War began. Fighting in Greece continued for most of the next 27 years.

Herodotus was still alive at the start of the Peloponnesian War, but another Greek, Thucydides, would write its history. Thucydides was born into a wealthy Athenian family about 460 B.C. Little else is known about the first 30 years of his life.

Shortly after the war began, the Athenians elected Thucydides as one of the city's 10 generals. Assigned to command a fleet off the coast of Thrace, he failed to prevent the Spartans from capturing an Athenian colony. As was the custom, Athens punished Thucydides by exiling him from Athens for 20 years.

With lots of time on his hands, Thucydides decided to write a prose account of the war as it happened, almost like a modern news reporter. He traveled extensively into the war zones, observed battles, interviewed Athenian and Spartan military and political leaders, and read documents relating to the war. He was the first to analyze human behavior in wartime. He concluded that war was rooted in human nature and would be repeated in the future.

Unlike Herodotus, Thucydides rejected telling crowd-pleasing stories and concentrated on the facts of important events. He avoided writing about myths, oracles, and superstitions. He recognized that even eyewitnesses could not always be reliable sources. In general, he tried hard to be accurate, fair, and unbiased.

Like Herodotus, Thucydides quoted speeches, but these actually took place. Thucydides heard some of them himself. As for the rest, he wrote that he stuck “as closely as possible to the general sense of what they really said.”

Thucydides and the Peloponnesian War

In the first sentence of his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides wrote that he began writing about the war because he believed “it would be a great war, and more worthy of relation than any other that had preceded it.” He went on to identify what he believed to be the “real cause” of the war. “The growth of the power of Athens, and the alarm that this inspired in Sparta,” he wrote, “made war inevitable.”

Thucydides wrote how Corinth, a Spartan ally already fighting the Athenians, pushed Sparta to go to war against “the tyrant city” and liberate Greece. Typically slow to act, Sparta finally agreed to lead the fight against Athens, demanding that it restore independence to the Greek cities under its control.

In Athens, Pericles also called for war, but only under certain conditions since he recognized Sparta's advantage on land with its larger professional army. He counseled the Athenians to fight a defensive war by remaining behind their city walls, depending on their superior navy and avoiding “schemes of fresh conquest.”

Thucydides wrote that only an honest leader like Pericles could make Athenian democracy work. But Pericles, whom Thucydides called “the first citizen,” died soon after the war began, probably in a plague that ravaged Athens. According to Thucydides, those who replaced Pericles ignored his defensive strategy and committed a series of blunders that eventually led to Sparta's victory over Athens.

Thucydides was interested in how both soldiers and civilians behaved in wartime. In 427 B.C., rebels in Corcyra, one of the city-states under the thumb of Athens, revolted against the democratic government there. Athens quickly crushed the revolt, and the people of the city slaughtered the rebel faction. This incident prompted Thucydides to comment on the evils of revolution:

The sufferings that revolution entailed upon cities were many and terrible, such as have occurred and always will occur as long as the nature of mankind remains the same. . . . The cause of all these evils was the lust for power arising from greed and ambition. . . .

In 421 B.C., the war was at a stalemate, and the two sides agreed on a “Fifty Year Peace Treaty.” It lasted only about five years.

As the war resumed, Athenian leaders argued for a major military expedition to Sicily. They disregarded Pericles’ advice that the Athenians should stay close to home.

In 413 B.C., a large Athenian fleet carrying thousands of soldiers headed for Syracuse, a Spartan ally in Sicily. The expedition failed to attack Syracuse immediately, allowing the city to prepare strong defenses and get help from Sparta.

The Athenians failed in several assaults on the city, including an unusual night attack that Thucydides described. Then the Athenians lost most of their ships in a battle within Syracuse’s harbor. Trapped, Athenian troops panicked and tried to escape inland. The Syracusans followed them, killing and capturing many. Thucydides described how it all ended at a river crossing:

Meanwhile the opposite [river] bank, which was steep, was lined with Syracusans, who showered missiles down upon the Athenians, most of them drinking greedily and heaped together in disorder in the hollow bed of the river. The [Spartans] also came down and butchered them, especially those in the water, which was thus immediately spoiled, but which they went on drinking the same, mud and all, bloody as it was, most even fighting to have it. . . .

As the war dragged on, atrocities on both sides increased. Probably the worst was a massacre in the defenseless city of Mycalessus in 413 B.C. by Thracians allied with Athens. Thucydides described the horror:

The Thracians bursting into Mycalessus sacked the houses and temples and butchered the inhabitants, sparing neither youth nor age but killing all they fell in with, one after the other, children and women. . . . Everywhere confusion reigned and death in all its shapes; and in particular they attacked a boys’ school . . . into which children had just gone, and massacred them all.

In 411 B.C., Thucydides suddenly stopped writing. The war, however, continued for seven more years until Sparta won a decisive victory over the Athenian fleet, finally forcing Athens to surrender in 404 B. C. We do not know why Thucydides never finished his History. He died, some ancient sources say violently, around 400 B.C., after the war ended.

Herodotus and Thucydides invented history, or at least the writing of it, in the Western world. Before Herodotus, the Greeks had no word for history in the sense of writing a narration of past events in prose. Therefore, the Roman writer Cicero was correct when he called Herodotus the “Father of History.”

Herodotus may have been the first Western historian, but Thucydides was the first modern one. He explained the causes of events, analyzed political developments like revolutions, and evaluated leaders such as Pericles. In addition, like historians today, he was rigorous in searching for the truth and discarding information that he could not verify.

Questions

1. According to Herodotus, what were the causes of the Persian Wars?
2. According to Thucydides, how did the Spartans and Athenians differ in their reasons for going to war with one another?
3. Compare Herodotus and Thucydides as historians.