

Herodotus and the Battle of Marathon: A misunderstood narrative of the East and West

By Jialing Cao

Author Biography

Jialing Cao is a freshman at Canterbury School, CT. She is deeply interested in the study of Ancient Greek literature, and hopes to explore how the subject connects to modern history and contemporary politics.

Abstract

Herodotus's *Histories* offers a valuable record of ancient history, but its portrayal of the East and West is not free from bias. Even though Herodotus attempted to write history from a neutral perspective, it is almost impossible for a historian to stay completely impartial. His account of the battle of Marathon, for instance, is often seen as emphasizing the binary between the “civilized” West and the “barbaric” East. This interpretation was influenced by contemporary movements like Neoclassicism and Orientalism. Leading scholars of these cultural movements including Edward Said interpreted Herodotus's description of Persia as “irrational” and “exotic”, which contributed to a stereotype of Eastern inferiority that persisted through centuries of Western culture. In order to further analyze Herodotus's *Histories*, this article offered a perspective inspired by the Postcolonial theory, which examined how the text was not just a historical account, but also a document that contributes to the construction of Western superiority.

Keywords: Herodotus, Battle of Marathon, East/West binary, Neoclassicism, Orientalism, Postcolonial theory, Greco-Persian Wars, Western superiority, Ancient history, Cultural movements, Historiography, Stereotypes and prejudice.

Introduction

Herodotus, often known as the “Father of History,” is a pivotal figure in the ancient world. While he is praised for documenting the Greco-Persian Wars and offering a detailed description of ancient civilizations, his works have also been credited for a historical narrative that may not have been his original intention. According to contemporary historian Naoise Mac Sweeney’s statement in her book *The West: A New History In Fourteen Lives*, “Herodotus seems to give us not only an ancient account of ‘the clash of civilizations’ but also an early formulation of the cultural genealogy of the West. At least, this is what he seems to give us” (2023, p. 15).

Herodotus’s *Histories* remains one of the most influential historical documents in the ancient world, as it is the primary source of information about the Greco-Persian Wars. His account of the Battle of Marathon, in particular, was seen by many historians, including Edward Said and John Gould, as an early sign of the division between East and West. This paper examines Herodotus’s *Histories* and its later reinterpretations, arguing that while Herodotus himself may not have intended to emphasize a division between East and West, his work had contributed to later cultural movements — including Neoclassicism, Orientalism, and the rise of postcolonial theory—which keep reinforcing the binary between “civilized” West and the “exotic” East. The ongoing debate about whether Herodotus intended to emphasize this division remains unresolved. However, it is crucial to critically analyze both the original text and reexamine the extended studies that may distort the facts.

Historical context of the battle

According to Herodotus’s *Histories* (Book VI), the Battle of Marathon, fought in 490 BCE, was driven by tensions between Greece and Persia. In 492 BCE, Darius the Great of Persia sent his brother Artaphrenes to impose peace on Ionia, divided the land for tax, and imposed democracy (Herodotus, 2017, 6.42–6.43). Then, in 491 BCE, Darius demanded that the Ionian cities and surrounding islands supply ships and troops for war, which

triggered the Ionian Revolt (499–494 BCE). With support from Athens and Eretria, the rebellion succeeded, but it also provoked Darius’s retaliation.

In 490 BCE, Darius the Great sent out forces to assault Greece. According to *Histories*,

He [Darius] dismissed from command Mardonius, who had fared so badly on his expedition, and appointed other generals to lead his armies against Athens and Eretria, Datis, a Mede by birth, and his own nephew Artaphrenes son of Artaphrenes; the order he gave them at their departure was to enslave Athens and Eretria and bring the slaves into his presence (Herodotus, 2017, 6.94).

Herodotus recorded that the Persians first sacked Naxos and Eretria before sailing to Marathon (Herodotus, 2017, 6.96, 6.99). At the same time, the Athenian force, with the joined force of Plataeans, marched to Marathon to meet them (Herodotus, 2017, 6.103). He described the Greeks’ strategy for the battle:

...he [Miltiades, the Athenian Strategist] arrayed the Athenians for battle, with the polemarch Callimachus commanding the right wing, ...and the other tribes were numbered out in succession next to each other. The Plataeans were marshalled last, holding the left wing (Herodotus, 2017, 6.110, 6.112).

The army was set in order and charged the Persians at full run, which defied the Persian expectation that they would be easily defeated. As a result, the Greeks won a decisive victory, killing 6,400 Persians while losing only 192 Greek soldiers.

Analysis of Herodotus’s account

Given the context of his writing, it’s evident that Herodotus’ account of the Battle of Marathon was detailed and based on factual information. However, despite his intention to present a neutral account of the battle, his works could still be easily misconstrued as reinforcing the East/West narrative. For example, Herodotus described Persian soldiers in *Histories* as arrogant and overconfident as they awaited their rivals. According to Herodotus,

The Persians saw them running to attack and prepared to receive them, thinking the Athenians absolutely crazy, since they saw how few of them there were and that they ran up so fast without either cavalry or archers. So the foreigners imagined, but when the Athenians all together fell upon the foreigners they fought in a way worthy of record. These are the first Hellenes whom we know of to use running against the enemy (2017, 6.112).

This paragraph can be interpreted as a biased account of history because, as a Greek person, Herodotus offered a subjective interpretation of Persian warriors' thoughts.

Moreover, Herodotus described the Battle of Marathon as a Persian invasion. He wrote that Persian rulers, including Artaphrenes and Darius the Great, were aggressive and wanted to gain control over the Greek city-states. To be more specific, Mardonius, a general who succeeded Artaphernes as the satrap of Ionia in 492 BCE, imposed peace on Ionia and divided its land for taxation. Then, they sacked Thasos and took control of its fleets and gold mines. He recorded,

Mardonius deposed all the Ionian tyrants and set up democracies in their cities... they intended to subdue as many of the Greek cities as they could. Their fleet subdued the Thasians, who did not so much as lift up their hands against it; their land army added the Macedonians to the slaves that they had already, for all the nations nearer to them than Macedonia had been made subject to the Persians before this (Herodotus, 2017, 6.43–6.44).

The detailed account of Darius and his general Mardonius' strategy in consolidating control over Greek cities emphasized the fact that the Persian rulers were tyrannical and ambitious. Additionally, Herodotus specifically described the Persians' atrocious cruelties against the Greek people as they sacked Greek city-states,

Since the coasts of Athos abound in wild beasts, some men were carried off by beasts and so perished; others were dashed against the rocks; those who could not swim perished because of that, and still others by the cold (Herodotus, 2017, 6.44).

With no historical account suggesting otherwise, the idea of the East as barbaric and tyrannical became deeply ingrained in Western thought. Thus, even though Herodotus tried to offer a neutral account of history, his works were still biased and misinterpreted as reinforcing the East/West binary.

Neoclassicism and Orientalism

Indeed, Herodotus's account of the ancient civilizations later became a foundation for modern cultural movements, such as Neoclassicism and Orientalism.

Neoclassicism, spanning from the mid-18th century to the early 19th century, was a movement that aimed to revive the values and standards of ancient Greece and Rome across various fields, including art, architecture, and democracy. Neoclassicists built a fabricated origin story of the West upon Herodotus's works and proposed the idea that Western civilization was rooted in the classical antiquity of Ancient Greece and Rome. An example of this can be seen in Neoclassical historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann's assertion in his book, *The History of Ancient Art*, that "The thoughts of the whole people rose higher with freedom, just as a noble branch rises from a sound stock. ... Herodotus shows that freedom alone was the basis of the power and superiority to which Athens attained" (Winckelmann, trans. Lodge, 1880, p. 15). From Winckelmann and many other contemporary historians' perspectives, Herodotus's study emphasizes the idea that the Western value of freedom and humanity was essentially rooted in Ancient Greece.

Besides neoclassicism, Orientalism in the 19th century is another movement that encouraged scholars to reinterpret Herodotus's account of ancient civilizations. A prominent Orientalist historian, Edward W. Said stated in his book *Orientalism*, "The Orient was almost a European invention and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences" (Said, 1979, p. 18). This quote directly shows how the East was constructed based on

Western culture's perspective: exotic and inferior, in contrast to the rationality of the West.

Indeed, the term "Orientalism" itself originated during the period of European Enlightenment and colonization of the Arab World, where European colonists thought of the East as the "other," a place that needed the "rescue" of Western civilization. Orientalists later viewed the creation of this word as a way to justify European colonization. They also believed that this action aligns with Herodotus's work, which depicts Persian rulers as barbaric and uncivilized, in contrast to the rational and civilized Greeks. Said stated that Herodotus's description of the Battle of Marathon was also a way of "othering" the East to emphasize the superiority of the West (Said, 1979).

Neoclassicism and Orientalism played an important role in shaping the West's self-image by reinforcing the stereotype of Western superiority. Both movements had a powerful impact on the academic and cultural environment of their time, which promoted the idea that the foundation of Western civilization lies in the classical heritage of Ancient Greece and Rome. This is evident in Edith Hamilton's assertion in his book *The Greek Way*, "the Greeks came into being and the world, as we know it, began" (Hamilton, 1958, p. 29). By continuously reinforcing ideas that cannot stand any test, these movements contributed to a broader narrative that placed the West as the center of cultural and historical development.

Theoretical framework: Reassessing Herodotus's work in modern scholarship

To understand why historians agreed that Herodotus's account constantly placed the West as the center of the world, this article adopts the postcolonial theory proposed by contemporary scholars, including Edward Said, Frantz Fanon, and Gayatri Spivak. The postcolonial theory was first proposed in the late 20th century, as scholars from previously colonized countries began to analyze the history, culture, and literature of imperial powers. This offers a framework for scholars to analyze

Herodotus's work from its reinforcement of Western cultural superiority, and its portrayal of the "Other."

Herodotus introduced the Battle of Marathon in *Histories* as the expansion of the Persian Empire and its conflicts with the Greek city-states. To be more specific, he describes the Greco-Persian Wars as a defense of Greece against Persian aggression. This narrative justifies Greek actions and affirms Greek identity by pointing out the prior threat posed by the Persian Empire. This is similar to Frantz Fanon's postcolonial arguments in his book, *The Wretched of the Earth*, about how history is written by the powerful and serves to legitimize their dominance; "... the raw materials come and go, legitimating the colonist's presence, while more dead than alive the colonized subject crouches forever in the same old dream. The colonist makes history" (Fanon, 1968, p. 14).

Moreover, postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak argues that history and culture cannot be explained without studying the power dynamics within the society. In her work *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, Spivak states,

Without considering the map of exploitation, on what grid of 'oppression' would they place this motley crew? ... Outside (though not completely so) the circuit of the international division of labor, there are people whose consciousness we cannot grasp if we close off our benevolence by constructing a homogeneous Other referring only to our own place in the seat of the Same or the Self (Spivak, 1988, p. 84).

This quote explains how colonizers constructed their sense of superiority and centrality by trying to simplify the diverse identities of the colonized. A similar example could be seen in Herodotus's depiction of non-Greek peoples in *Histories* Book II. He wrote, "If someone kills a cat, whether intentionally or not, the penalty is death. When a fire breaks out, the Egyptians do not bother to put it out but devote themselves to saving the cats" (Herodotus, trans. 2017, 2.66). Herodotus portrayed the Egyptian customs and their worship of cats as irrational and absurd, in contrast to the Greek cultural norms. His description exemplifies the "othering" of

the Egyptians while emphasizing the West's centrality.

Over centuries, Herodotus's work left a significant impact on people's understanding of history. Even though he appeared long before the time of European colonialism, the similarities between his work and modern studies imply his contribution to the identity of Western civilization.

Conclusion

Over the course of history, various interpretations of Herodotus's *Histories* continue to reinforce the stereotype between East/West. Nowadays, it seems to be common knowledge that "the West" is associated with classics, Greece, and Rome; and the East is linked with mystery and exoticism. According to National Geographic, "Europe's early political history can be traced back to ancient Greece and Rome, both of which profoundly affected how Western civilizations govern their territories and citizens" (National Geographic, n.d.). People are constantly exposed to these false and untested ideas, which give rise to more stereotypes and prejudice.

As history learners, our perspectives are often shaped by other scholars' ideas. However, in order to truly understand history, it is important to critically evaluate texts like Herodotus's *Histories*, revealing the author's original intention from later interpretations. This allows us to have a more comprehensive understanding of history and helps us distinguish the facts from constructed ideas. In a world still impacted by the East/West binaries, reassessing ancient texts isn't just an academic study, but a critical approach to questioning the cultural stereotypes that continue to influence modern politics. Thus, by knowing the constructed nature of history, we can have a more nuanced view of both the past and present.

References

- Fanon, F. (1968). *The wretched of the earth* (C. Farrington, Trans.). Grove Press.
- Gress, D. (1998). *From Plato to NATO: The Idea of the West and Its Opponents*. Simon and Schuster.
- Hamilton, E. (1958). *The Greek way*. W.W. Norton.
- Herodotus. (2017). *Histories* (R. Waterfield, Trans.). Cambridge University Press. Original work published ca. 5th century BCE.
- Mac Sweeney, N. (2023, May 23). Why the idea of Western civilization is more myth than history. Literary Hub. <https://lithub.com/why-the-idea-of-western-civilization-is-more-myth-than-history/>
- Mac Sweeney, N. (2023). *The West: A new history in fourteen lives*. Dutton.
- National Geographic. (n.d.). Europe: Human geography. Retrieved from <https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/europe-human-geography>
- Nudell, J. P. (2024). What is the West? A comparative review of Naoise Mac Sweeney, *The West: A New History in Fourteen Lives* and Josephine C. Quinn, *How the World Made the West: A 4,000-Year History*. Frontières. Retrieved from <https://journals.openedition.org/frontieres/3287>
- Said, E. W. (1979). *Orientalism*. Vintage Books.
- Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the subaltern speak? In P. Williams & L. Chrisman (Eds.), *Marxism and the interpretation of culture* (pp. 271–313). University of Illinois Press.
- Winckelmann, J. J. (1880). *The history of ancient art* (G. H. Lodge, Trans.). J. R. Osgood. Original work published 1764.