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Review–discussion: Interpreting and contextualising the Histories

[Review of: E. Bowie (2018) *Herodotus: Narrator. Scientist. Historian*; T. Harrison, E. Irwin (2018) *Interpreting Herodotus*]

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DOI

[10.29173/histos674](https://doi.org/10.29173/histos674)

Publication date

2024

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Histos

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Citation for published version (APA):

de Bakker, M. (2024). Review–discussion: Interpreting and contextualising the *Histories*: [Review of: E. Bowie (2018) *Herodotus: Narrator. Scientist. Historian*; T. Harrison, E. Irwin (2018) *Interpreting Herodotus*]. *Histos*, 18, LXXX-XCII. <https://doi.org/10.29173/histos674>

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REVIEW–DISCUSSION
INTERPRETING AND CONTEXTUALISING
THE *HISTORIES**

Ewen Bowie, ed., *Herodotus: Narrator. Scientist. Historian*. Trends in Classics, Suppl. 59. Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2018. Pp. 348. Paperback, €144.95/\$159.99. ISBN 978-3-11-058153-9.

Thomas Harrison and Elizabeth Irwin, edd., *Interpreting Herodotus*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. Pp. 425. Hardback, £132.50. ISBN 978-0-19-880361-4.

Conference volumes offer a valuable advantage by providing structural and thematic coherence to a collection of papers originally crafted for oral delivery. They prove particularly beneficial when compiling contributions on a single ancient author such as Herodotus, whose *Histories* are extensively explored from various historical and literary perspectives. In 2018, two fresh additions joined the handful of volumes specifically on Herodotus that have appeared since the beginning of the century.¹ The first, titled *Herodotus: Narrator. Scientist. Historian*, emerged from a conference that was planned in Delphi in 2015. Regrettably, the event was cancelled shortly before its scheduled start. Nevertheless, the papers were assembled and edited by Ewen Bowie. The second volume, *Interpreting Herodotus*, stems from a conference held at Columbia University in 2013, with editorial oversight from Thomas Harrison and Elizabeth Irwin. Both volumes offer intriguing insights into Herodotus' work and are meticulously edited, featuring combined bibliographies and helpful indices. However, the latter volume demonstrates better internal cohesion and overall paper quality. Their difference in these respects highlights the significance of conference venues for fostering initial exchanges of ideas, literature, and expertise. Additionally, the latter volume includes an introduction that sets the thematic direction for the subsequent

* I apologise for taking so long to submit the review after being assigned the task.

¹ Luraghi (2001); Bakker–de Jong–van Wees (2002); Derow and Parker (2003); Karageorghis and Taifakos (2004); Dewald and Marincola (2006); Bleckmann (2007); Irwin and Greenwood (2007); Baragwanath and de Bakker (2012); Gambino Longo (2012); Dunsch and Ruffing (2013); Geus–Irwin–Poiss (2013); Priestley and Zali (2016); Figueira and Soares (2020); Harrison and Skinner (2020); Matijašić (2022).

explorations. The former volume lacks such an introduction (apart from a short preface), though the terms ‘narrator’, ‘scientist’, and ‘historian’ merit definition and elaboration in relation to the current scholarly debate on Herodotus.

Bowie’s volume, the first discussed here, has storytelling as one of its themes. In the opening chapter titled ‘Ὀμηρικώτατος? Battle Narratives in Herodotus’ (3–24), John Marincola offers an elegant assessment of how Herodotus relates to Homer in crafting his battle narratives. He highlights Herodotus’ focus on the lead-up and aftermath of the battles of the Greco-Persian Wars, with relatively brief descriptions of the events on the battlefield itself, which Homer typically describes with detailed attention to individual feats and casualties.² Marincola also identifies significant similarities, such as the narrative technique of alternating between wide-angle views of collective movement and close-ups of individual encounters on the battlefield. Moreover, Marincola suggests that Herodotus’ emphasis on Sparta and Athens, often attributed to their prominence in the Archidamian War, may actually stem from Homer’s narrative tendency to grant *kleos* to the *promachoi* in his battles. However, it is worth noting that Herodotus’ focus on Sparta and Athens is not exclusive. He also acknowledges achievements of Ionians and Samians who fought on the Persian side, crediting them with success against the Greek coalition (e.g., Hdt. 8.85).

In the subsequent contribution titled ‘Herodotus the Story-teller’ (25–36), Angus Bowie explores the literary features that make Herodotus’ stories themselves so memorable. Analysing well-known tales like Gyges and Candaules, and Polycrates and his ring, Bowie identifies wordplay, repetition, direct speech, and story-patterning as techniques used to highlight their moral complexities and thematic significance. While Bowie describes these devices as ‘very simple’ in the conclusion (36), it is important to note that scholars like Long and de Jong have demonstrated Herodotus’ adeptness in employing them in a highly nuanced and sophisticated manner.³

Two other essays in this volume concentrate on Herodotus’ storytelling in the biography of Pharaoh Mycerinus (Hdt. 2.129–35), examining its potential Egyptian origins and elements that appear to stem from Herodotus’ re-interpretations of existing traditions. In his well-documented piece ‘Time, Thy Pyramids: The *Novella* of Mycerinus’ (77–107), Ioannis Konstantakos highlights notable reversals in this section of the *Histories*. For instance, he points out the paradox of Rhodopis, a prostitute who receives a royal memorial (Hdt. 2.134–5), and of Mycerinus, whose life is dramatically shortened despite his leniency and kindness, while his tyrannical predecessors enjoy long lives. Konstantakos

² For an in-depth discussion of this topic, see now Fragoulaki (2022).

³ Long (1987); de Jong (1999) and (2002).

proposes a connection with the motif of Egypt as an inverted world, introduced by Herodotus as he begins his digression (Hdt. 2.35–6).

In his essay ‘Herodotus on Queens and Courtesans of Egypt’ (109–22), Gregory Nagy speculates on Rhodopis’ potential Egyptian antecedents, suggesting a link with the early Egyptian queen Nitocris. Nagy proposes that Rhodopis was modelled after Nitocris when stories from different cultural backgrounds intersected in the context of Naukratis during the Saite dynasty.

A second significant theme explored in this volume is Herodotus’ engagement with texts of his predecessors and contemporaries. A standout piece in this regard is ‘Justifying Violence in Herodotus’ *Histories* 3.38: *Nomos*, King of All, and Pindaric Poetics’ (37–58) by K. Scarlett Kingsley. Kingsley delves into the full text of Pindar’s fragment 169a (Maehler) as it has been reconstructed from various sources. Beyond the striking royal metaphor that Herodotus quotes, Pindar’s poem qualifies *nomos* as a concept that ‘justifies what is most violent’, referring to instances of violence in the myth of Heracles stealing Diomedes’ mares. Kingsley suggests that when Herodotus refers to the Pindaric metaphor, he subtly hints at a darker, more violent aspect of *nomos*. In the immediate context of the *Histories*, characters use *nomos* to legitimise the unrestrained lawlessness of the Persian monarch (Hdt. 3.31.4) and to describe the Persian autocratic constitution itself (3.82.5). This ambiguity in the *nomos* reference at 3.38 resonates well with the unsettling nature of Darius’ confrontational testing of Greek and Callatian funerary customs, which prompts Herodotus to quote Pindar.⁴

In ‘Herodotus as a Literary Critic’ (157–74) Nikolay Grintser also refers to this quote, drawing a connection with Pindar’s fragment 215a (Maehler, ‘Different are the customs of different people, and everyone praises his own justice’, transl. Grintser, p. 173). Grintser argues that Herodotus sought internal consistency in his poetic sources, extending this idea to Herodotus’ discussion of Homer (Hdt. 2.116–17). He demonstrates that Herodotus’ use of etymology as a tool for interpreting poetic texts aligns him with contemporary sophists.

P. J. Finglass examines further interaction with Pindar in his piece ‘Sophocles’ Oedipus and Herodotus’ Periander’ (59–75). He persuasively adjusts or plays down several analogies assumed by Vernant (1982) between the myth of the Theban Labdakid house and the narratives about the Cypselid tyrants of Corinth. Pindar re-emerges in Rosalind Thomas’ contribution ‘Truth and Authority in Herodotus’ Narrative: False Stories and True Stories’ (265–84). In this commendable essay Thomas juxtaposes Herodotus’ account of the founding of Cyrene (Hdt. 4.145–205) with Pindar’s *Pythian* 4. She notes a pattern in Herodotus’ tendency to ‘refute, complicate and undermine’ *kleos*

⁴ Christ (1994) 187–9.

as bestowed by his encomiastic lyric predecessors. Thomas extends this observation to Herodotus' narrative of the battle of Plataea, which portrays Spartan hesitancy and fear, contrasting with the straightforwardly heroic depiction of Sparta's intervention found in Simonides' encomiastic Plataea elegy. Thomas' approach aligns with recent scholarship that identifies a polemic response in Herodotus to encomiastic poetry celebrating Greek accomplishments in the Greco-Persian Wars.⁵

Two contributions delve into the connections between Herodotus and the Hippocratic school of Medicine. Both expand on Thomas' influential work *Herodotus in Context* (2000). In 'Herodotus on Health and Disease' (175–96), Paul Demont argues that while Herodotus knew about Hippocratic innovations, he also relied on older, traditional methods to describe diseases. He speculates that the story of Pheretime being consumed alive by maggots (Hdt. 4.205) might be linked to a specific ulcer known as *θηρίον* in the medical literature, although Herodotus does not specify the nature of Pheretime's ailment. While Demont's essay falls under the 'Scientist' category of the volume, Christopher Pelling's contribution, 'Causes in Competition: Herodotus and Hippocratics' (199–222), is categorised under 'Historian'. Pelling examines the relationship between historical explanations in Herodotus' *Histories* and scientific explanations in works that stem from the Hippocratic school.⁶ He notes a similarity in both attributing events or illnesses to multiple co-existent causes that either accumulate or interact in a discernible manner. Importantly, Pelling demonstrates that Herodotus' use of multiple causes should not be viewed as an archaic mode of thinking but rather as an acknowledgement of the challenges in explaining past events amidst the unpredictability of the evolving Archidamian War.

Geography takes centre stage as the third topic in this volume. In 'Herodotus Mapping out his Genre: The Interaction of Myth and Geography in the Libyan Logos' (125–38), Vasiliki Zali examines various references to epic and epinician poetry in Herodotus' depiction of Africa beyond Egypt (4.126–205). She astutely argues that by alluding to well-known myths about the Argonauts and the *nostoi* of the Homeric heroes, Herodotus is able to place the story of Cyrene's foundation within a heroic, mythical framework. In 'Herodotus the Geographer' (139–55), Reinhold Bichler discusses trends in studying the relationship between spatial thinking and meaning in the *Histories*. Some relevant studies in this field could have been included, such as Purves (2010) and Barker et al. (2016), which delve into Herodotus' own perspective in portraying spatial entities and their interrelations.

⁵ Marincola (2007); de Bakker (2018) 77–9.

⁶ For further elaboration of these ideas, see now Pelling (2019).

Finally, two contributions in the section of the volume focusing on Herodotus as a ‘Historian’ appropriately delve into *ἱστορίη* as their starting point. In ‘ἱστορέειν and θαυμάζειν: Scientific Terms and Signs of Unity in Herodotus’ *Histories*’ (223–41) Smaro Nikolaidou-Arabatzi interprets the multitude of references to wonders (*θώματα*) in Herodotus’ *Histories* as the primary impetus for the activity qualified as *ἱστορέειν*. This analysis could benefit from incorporating earlier studies by Schepens (1980), Müller (1981), and Lateiner (1989) to bolster or qualify some of its broader assumptions. For instance, the claim that Herodotus’ view of nature was ‘generally pre-determined by the strength of his belief in its stability’ (233) remains unsubstantiated and seems contradictory to his acknowledgement of continuous change, as expressed in his introduction (Hdt. 1.5.3) and in his discussions of natural phenomena like river delta silting (e.g., Hdt. 2.10).⁷

In ‘Χρυσός, χρόνος, and κλέος: Objects of Gold, Cognition, Ambiguity, and Authority in Herodotus’ Lydian *Logos*’ (243–64), Maria Xanthou argues that ‘[Herodotus] uses objects as vehicles or tools in his attempt to establish at an early stage the validity of his method, i.e. *ἱστορίης ἀπόδειξις* as enacted enquiry’ (246). The focus here is on the golden dedications of the Lydian Mermnad dynasty in Delphi. By presenting their object-biographies,⁸ Herodotus’ demonstrates how the passage of time (*χρόνος*) can undermine aspirations for lasting *κλέος*, as evidenced by the damage, removal, or repurposing of these objects. While this contribution is commendable, a more rigorous exploration of its connection with *ἱστορίη* could enhance its argument. Additionally, the assertion that Midas’ throne in Delphi symbolically reinforces the oracle’s authority in response to Gyges’ usurpation of power (254) lacks conviction, especially in light of the moral of the Lydian *Logos*, which underscores that lavish offerings to Greek oracle sanctuaries do not always guarantee desired outcomes, as exemplified by Croesus’ fate after consulting the Delphic oracle.



The second volume under consideration, *Interpreting Herodotus*, edited by Thomas Harrison and Elizabeth Irwin, uses Charles Fornara’s seminal *Herodotus. An Interpretative Essay* (1971a) as its starting point. Its goal is to re-examine the topics introduced by Fornara and reassess them in light of almost fifty years of subsequent scholarship on Herodotus.

⁷ A minor omission in this contribution concerns the absence of references to Homer’s use of the term *histor* (*Il.* 18.501; 23.486). Furthermore, the battle of Salamis cannot be described as the ‘total defeat’ of Xerxes’ expedition (p. 239), given that the Persian army remained in Greece until after the defeat at Plataea in the subsequent year.

⁸ On object biographies, see now Hopkins–Costello–Davis (2021).

Fornara's most significant contribution to the study of Herodotus lies in recognising that contemporary concerns heavily influenced Herodotus' writing of the *Histories*, particularly evident in his account of Xerxes' invasion (Books 7–9).⁹ While earlier historicist publications mainly discuss Herodotus' perspective in relation to Periclean Athens,¹⁰ Fornara argues that Herodotus 'directed his work to the Greek world in general'.¹¹ He contends that the backdrop of the *Histories* is the 'unmitigated but thoroughly unavoidable disaster' of the Archidamian War between Athens and Sparta,¹² as evidenced by direct references to contemporary incidents (e.g., Hdt. 6.98.2; 7.137.3; 9.73.3), by its focus on the origins of Athens' empire-building at Sestos in the *Histories'* closing chapters (Hdt 9.117–22),¹³ and by its more moralistic, pessimistic view of human life. This perspective includes the inevitability of fortune's transience (where big cities become small and *vice versa*, Hdt. 1.5.3) and the concept of imperial overstretch (*hubris*) leading to downfall, as voiced by Artabanus in his warning to Xerxes (Hdt. 7.10ε–ζ).

The majority of the chapters in the volume aim to engage with Fornara's 'past in the present' hypothesis. Particularly compelling is Jonas Grethlein's contribution 'The Dynamics of Time: Herodotus' *Histories* and Contemporary Athens Before and After Fornara' (223–42). After providing a brief yet comprehensive overview of earlier scholarship, Grethlein challenges Fornara's assertion that Herodotus wrote for his contemporary audience, while Thucydides wrote for future readers.¹⁴ By highlighting metanarrative statements in the *Histories* and Herodotus' tendency to incorporate ambiguous oracles and other signs, Grethlein argues that Herodotus was aware that the interpretation of history itself is bound by temporal constraints and may evolve over time. The historian's occasional use of the prospective imperfect¹⁵ suggests that he anticipated a future readership, when his present would become past. This implies 'an awareness that the *Histories* are subject to the same dynamics of time as the subjects of its narrative' (240). Consequently, Herodotus' endeavour to memorialise the past and attribute meaning to its events becomes inherently open-ended, allowing for differing interpretations by future generations of readers. This also explains the 'narrative's polyphony'

⁹ Fornara (1971a) 41. This line of thought was subsequently explored in relation to Athens, in particular by Moles (1999), (2002) and Irwin (2013a), (2013b), and in the volume under review (see below).

¹⁰ In particular Meyer (1899) 201–29, who considered Herodotus an apologist of Athens and Pericles. His thesis was followed, though modified, by Jacoby (1913) 43–7.

¹¹ Fornara (1971a) 74.

¹² Fornara (1971a) 77.

¹³ Fornara (1971a) 81.

¹⁴ Fornara (1971a) 60–1.

¹⁵ Naiden (1999).

(240) evident in the inclusion of variant versions and the representation of multiple sources.

The volume itself is typically Herodotean in its polyphony, too. Grethlein's assertion that Herodotus finished his work in the tumultuous years of the Archidamian War (230) is challenged by Elizabeth Irwin's argument in 'The End of the *Histories* and the End of the Atheno-Peloponnesian Wars' (279–334). Irwin proposes that Herodotus took into consideration the defeat of Athens in 404 BCE, suggesting that the publication date is two decades later than commonly believed.¹⁶ Her essay examines the concluding chapters of the *Histories*, exploring various ways in which its content can be linked to the conclusion of the Peloponnesian War and even be seen as a response to the abrupt ending of Thucydides' work.¹⁷ Particularly intriguing is the suggestion (292–6) that the exchange between the vindictive Lampon from Aegina and Spartan chief-of-staff Pausanias (Hdt. 9.78–9) was crafted in light of the debate in Greece about the best way to punish Athens after it was defeated in 404 BCE. While states such as Aegina, which endured severe oppression under Athenian rule, advocated ruthless retaliation, Sparta chose a more restrained approach, offering Athens a reprieve by installing a pro-Spartan oligarchic government. Implicit references to accusations against Pericles in the final chapters of the *Histories* (296–316) are however more challenging to discern because they are inferred from later sources like Diodorus and Plutarch. Furthermore, if Herodotus indeed hinted at Pericles when describing Artayctes' *hierosulia* (Hdt. 9.116), why would this fit a post-war context rather than a time closer to when Pericles was alive? According to Irwin, Herodotus' narrative is 'implicit' and his method 'oblique' (323). This contrasts, however, with his tendency to explicitly mention incidents in the early years of the Archidamian War (see above). And if Herodotus considered the entire Peloponnesian War when completing his *Histories*, why would he omit references to significant events such as the Melos genocide, the Athenian defeat in Sicily, the Euboean revolt, and the oligarchic revolution in Athens, especially when they could support his broader historical theory? Despite suggestive parallels, a smoking gun is lacking, and alleged implied references to post-war events can also be interpreted differently. For example, the conversation between Lampon and Pausanias about appropriate retribution can be likened to the debate between Cleon and Diodotus in the Athenian assembly (Thuc. 3.37–50) regarding the punishment for Mytilene's revolt, which took place in 427 BCE, closer to the commonly accepted publication date of the *Histories*. Despite these objections, Irwin's contribution deserves praise for its courage in challenging established views in current scholarship on

¹⁶ In this she goes beyond Fornara (1971b), who also leans towards a more recent date by proposing 414 BCE, pointing at intertextuality with Aristophanes' *Birds*.

¹⁷ Irwin expands on arguments made in her previous work. See Irwin (2013a) and (2013b).

Herodotus. Her thorough interpretative analysis of the *Histories* offers a valuable opportunity for the field to critically re-evaluate and, if deemed appropriate, strengthen its assumptions regarding the publication date of Herodotus' work.

Equally thought-provoking is Joseph Skinner's contribution 'Herodotus and his World' (187–222), which also engages with Fornara's assertion that Herodotus wrote with a contemporary audience in mind. However, Skinner shifts the focus to the audience itself and argues that this audience may have been more interculturally aware and more cosmopolitan than commonly assumed. A significant aspect of his argument is his caution against rigidly dividing the *Histories* into ethnographical and historical sections, with each employing different methods of inquiry. Instead, Skinner examines passages where descriptive elements and historical narrative intertwine, mutually reinforcing each other. He argues that there are no 'separate strands of enquiry, one historical and the other focusing on cultural description, for the very simple reason that the distinction is not one that he or his audiences would have recognised, or perhaps have even understood' (211).

While seven chapters in this volume delve to varying extents into Fornara's 'past in the present' hypothesis, four other chapters focus on his perspective regarding Herodotus' Egypt book. Fornara evaluates Book 2 in light of his discussion of viewpoints of unitarians and separatists concerning the origins of Herodotus' project.¹⁸ Arguing that the book exhibits a different outlook and self-presentation of the historian, he suggests it to be an earlier composition with more limited moral and philosophical scope compared with Books 1 and 7–9, which show signs of a more mature intellectual development. Both the editors of, and contributors to, this volume rally against this 'developmental hypothesis', drawing upon the wealth of knowledge accumulated over the past five decades regarding the cultural-historical context in which Herodotus operated. John Dillery, in 'Making *Logoi*. Herodotus' Book 2 and Hecataeus of Miletus' (17–52), re-evaluates Herodotus' relationship with Hecataeus, interpreting the specifically confrontational nature of Herodotus' arguments in Book 2 as a testament to successful heuristic innovation. In 'The Lesson of Book 2' (53–74), Ewen Bowie points to the alternative story of Helen in Egypt (Hdt. 2.112–20), which, in its moral outlook, connects with other parts of the *Histories*. Bowie also considers Herodotus to be influenced by archaic elegiac poetry (Mimnernus, Xenophanes, Simonides), tragedy (Aeschylus), and epic (Panyassis), while suggesting that the tone, debates, and philosophy in the *Histories* can be placed in a context of 'multifarious sophistic enquiry' (71). Reinhold Bichler, in 'Herodotus' Book 2 and the Unity of the Work' (75–98) emphasises the adept integration of the Egypt book into the broader spatial

¹⁸ Fornara (1971a) 1–23.

and temporal conception of the *Histories*. Christopher Tuplin, in ‘Dogs That Do Not (Always) Bark: Herodotus on Persian Egypt’ (99–123) explores why Herodotus presents such a fragmented depiction of Egypt under Achaemenid rule, considering how it would have appeared to Herodotus in his own era.

Three chapters in this volume diverge from Fornara’s essay in exploring areas that he did not (fully) explore. Robert Rollinger, in his piece ‘Herodotus and the Transformation of Ancient Near Eastern Motifs: Darius I, Oebares, and the Neighing Horse’ (125–48), examines oriental motifs in the tale of Darius’ final steps of accession to the kingship (Hdt. 3.84.3–88), pointing to material sources such as an Urartian statue depicting a king, groom, and horses, as described in the annals of Sargon II, and horse oracles found in Neo-Assyrian documents. Emily Greenwood, in ‘Surveying Greatness and Magnitude in Herodotus’ (163–86), draws attention to the contrast between the physical, geographical, and spatial greatness articulated or perceived by characters in the *Histories* and the often underwhelming outcomes of such greatness in the narrative. Meanwhile, Wolfgang Blösel, in ‘Herodotus’ Allusions to the Sparta of his Day’ (243–64), examines Herodotus’ portrayal of Sparta against the backdrop of its actions in the years leading up to the Archidamian War. He concludes that Herodotus’ emphasis on Sparta’s unsuccessful alliances with Croesus, Scythians, Athenians, and Chians (Hdt. 1.69–70, 83; 6.84, 120; 8.132) aligns with Sparta’s reputation in the later fifth century as a wavering, hesitant power, primarily concerned with safeguarding its own territory and reluctant to commit to campaigns beyond the Peloponnese.

A notable aspect of this volume is its diverse range of methodological approaches. The referential analysis of the *Histories*, exemplified by the late Peter Rhodes’ study of Herodotus’ constitutional terminology (‘Herodotus and Democracy’, 265–77), is juxtaposed with Kai Ruffing’s analysis of Herodotus’ presentation of the *Histories* (‘Gifts for Cyrus, Tribute for Darius’, 149–61). Ruffing demonstrates how Herodotus’ depiction of the Persian kings’ revenue generation can be linked to contemporary discussions about the relationship between warfare and financial resources. In the final chapter (‘The Moral of History’, 335–55), Thomas Harrison draws on Hayden White’s theories on narrativity in historical representation to highlight the moral lessons that both ancient readers and contemporary audiences are meant to derive from the *Histories*.¹⁹ Herodotus’ intricate, multifaceted and polyphonic narrative is never straightforward and continually offers new avenues for interpretation. Overall,

¹⁹ White (1987).

this volume succeeds admirably in providing a wide array of fresh interpretations, making it a worthy successor to Fornara's *Interpretative Essay*.²⁰

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²⁰ The volume is carefully edited and referencing is by and large adequate. This reviewer only found a few small slips, as on p. 180, where Demaratus should be replaced by Artabanus.

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