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Herodotus

*Mathieu de Bakker**

And when the sun appeared at the horizon, Xerxes made a libation from a golden bowl into the sea and prayed to the sun that no misfortune would happen to him of such a kind that it would force him to abort the conquest of Europe before he had reached its borders. When he finished his prayer he threw the bowl into the Hellespont together with a golden vessel and a Persian sword, which they call an *akinakes*. Of these gifts I cannot exactly determine whether he threw them into the sea as a sacrifice to the sun or because he repented his lashing of the Hellespont and sought to placate the sea with gifts.¹

7.54.2

Just before the Persians start their crossing of the Hellespont, Herodotus describes how Xerxes prays to the sun and throws gifts into the water. He admits his uncertainty as to whether these gifts should be seen as belonging to the ritual itself or as an attempt to appease the Hellespont, which Xerxes lashed after a violent storm had ripped apart his bridge of ships (7.34–35). In this brief passage, Herodotus brings together various aspects that are relevant to an analysis of his characterizing techniques. First, there is his stance as a narrator who observes the scene as an empirical historian, abstaining from an exact diagnosis of motives, since these are within Xerxes' mind and cannot be determined. In order to write a persuasive narrative about the past, he presents himself as a researcher capable of assessments based on observable evidence. It is from this position that he endows his historical characters with credible and recognizable traits, and regularly speculates when ascribing motivation to them. Second, there is the subtle way in which Herodotus adds nuance to Xerxes'

* I thank the editors of this volume for their useful guidance, numerous valuable suggestions and meticulous editing, Emily Baragwanath for her sharp observations, and Hannah Kousbroek for correcting my English.

1 Translations and transliterations in this chapter are based upon the OCT of Herodotus edited by Hude (third edition, 1927). The translations are my own unless otherwise indicated. For stylistic reasons I prefer to write Herodotus when I refer to the narrator of the *Histories* and will therefore indicate when I refer to Herodotus in another capacity.

character by presenting his prayer and the possible motives for throwing the bowl into the sea. His first interpretation portrays Xerxes from an ethnographical point of view, as king fulfilling the role of priest in the typically Persian worship of the sun (1.131.2). The second interpretation ties in with a darker reading of Xerxes as an impulsive, overconfident king all too keen to prove himself worthy of his royal title. Both aspects of his portrait come together in the king's prayer that he may conquer Europe in its entirety. Conquest of foreign territory is itself considered an ambition demanded of all Persian kings, but the objective of subjecting the continent in its entirety demonstrates Xerxes' overconfidence.

As the Xerxes example shows, a short passage already reveals various methods that, taken together, create certain effects and invite the narratee to engage with the material presented. Given the vast number of interesting characters within the *Histories*, this chapter will only scratch the surface of Herodotus' characterizing methods, and the number of examples will necessarily be restricted. I hope, however, to cover the main narratological techniques that Herodotus uses to encourage the narratee to reflect upon his characters and upon similarities and differences between them, both within and beyond the limits of his work.

Herodotus' Principles in Characterizing Historical Agents

Herodotus aims at describing 'the events that occurred because of men' (*ta genomena ex anthrōpōn*, proem) and makes individual humans primarily responsible for great and marvellous historical events.² In doing so, he pays particular attention to monarchs and tyrants whom he features throughout the *Histories*. Given the anthropocentric nature of his enterprise, he presumably thought carefully about the characters of the individuals whom he awarded a role in his narrative.³ His awareness of the concept of human character and the extent of its influence is revealed in the narrative of Cambyses, who in a volatile

2 I therefore do not discuss Herodotus' characterization of the gods and their influence upon human life. For this vexed question see Lateiner 1989: 189–210, Harrison 2000a, Gould 2001, Mikalson 2002 and Scullion 2006.

3 Baragwanath 2015: 18 formulates this more forcefully: 'Crucial to Herodotus' recounting and memorializing *ta genomena ex anthrōpōn*, "what has come out of men", and explaining cause and responsibility, are insight into the character of individuals and nations and the relationship of character to action.' In this chapter I will mainly focus upon the characters of individuals.

mood orders his servants to kill his adviser Croesus. They, however, 'know his manner of behaving' (*epistamenoī ton tropon autou*, 3.36.5) and decide to hide him, hoping to be rewarded when the king repents for his deed. Elsewhere, Herodotus uses the word *tropos* in a similar way, for instance in qualifying Aristides as the 'best' and 'most righteous' Athenian based on information 'about his character' (*autou ton tropon*, 8.79.1).⁴

For the historian Herodotus, the task of assessing characters may not have been easy. In most cases, he must have based his account on traditions.⁵ These could differ in many respects, as can be derived from a comparison between the portraits of Croesus by Herodotus and Bacchylides.⁶ Both describe the scene of Croesus on the pyre, but whereas Herodotus makes Cyrus responsible for this punishment (1.86.2), Bacchylides presents a Croesus who ascends the pyre voluntarily, and is rescued by the gods. The poet qualifies the Lydian as an 'old man' (*geronta*, Bacch. *Ode* 3.59) who is rescued for his 'piety' (*di' eusebeian*, Bacch. *Ode* 3.61) in reward for his sumptuous gifts to Apollo in Delphi. In Herodotus' narrative these gifts ultimately prove to be futile, as they only appear to delay Croesus' downfall (1.91.3). Herodotus presents the king as a 'late-learner' who repeatedly ignores sound advice, loses his empire mainly because of his own faults, and, even as adviser to Cyrus, is not able to internalize the lessons he should have learnt from his career (see below), which leads to the defeat by the Massagetae. The comparison demonstrates that Herodotus and Bacchylides based their versions on different traditions and took liberties in characterizing Croesus, so that he fitted well within the themes and purposes of their works.⁷

Croesus lived in a past that had become legendary by the time that Herodotus was active, which may have allowed him some liberty in adapting the records of the past to his needs. This was different, however, for more recent prominent individuals like Xerxes, Themistocles and Pausanias, who were

4 For other instances of *tropos* meaning 'character' see 1.96.2 (Deioces), 1.107.2 (Cambyses the elder), 6.128.1 (the characters of the suitors of Agariste). Herodotus uses *kharaktēr* to indicate traits of distinction in appearance (1.116.1) or in language (1.57.3; 142.4), and *noos* and *phronēma* to refer to a particular plan or mindset (3.122.1–2; 3.125.2). Observe also Herodotus' use of 'nature' (*phusis*) and 'constitution' (*katastasis*) in his paraphrase of Themistocles' harangue at Salamis (8.83.1) to refer to man's general physical and mental capacities, rather than specifically to his character (cf. Baragwanath 2015: 19–20).

5 The dynamics of this process have been lucidly explained by Finley [1965] 1975: 24–29 and Thomas 1989.

6 See Segal 1971 and Crane 1996 for in-depth studies and comparison of the two versions.

7 Compare the ways in which the tragedians characterize their heroes in accordance with the needs of their plots (→).

remembered by many in Herodotus' time, and whose records must have been manifold and at variance depending on local prerogatives, constitutions and politics.⁸ Despite apparent controversies in the source material, Herodotus' characterization of these individuals is remarkably consistent. While he often inserts variant versions of the course of events in the past,⁹ he does not mention controversies in his sources about an individual's traits.¹⁰ In the alternative version of Xerxes' escape from Greece, for instance, (8.118), the king demands that his subjects sacrifice their lives when the ship turns out to be overloaded. Later he praises the captain with a crown for saving him, but also decapitates him as punishment for the loss of his servants. The tradition, which Herodotus did not believe in (8.119.1), shows traits of Xerxes' character that match with depictions of him elsewhere, such as his fearful nature, his generosity in praise and his cruelty in punishing his subjects.¹¹ Herodotus portrays his protagonists with a steady hand, and, whereas he includes variant versions on actions and motivations, in his characterization of individuals does not hint at conflicts in his sources.¹²

Herodotus' steady hand in characterizing does not mean that he avoids complexity. He is aware that characters are not stable and coherent entities, but may change under the influence of circumstances.¹³ He addresses such character change in his Constitution Debate, where he makes Otanes observe the following:

Once a man becomes a monarch, even if he is the best person in the world
(*ton ariston andrōn pantōn*), he will leave his customary way of thinking
(*ektos tōn eōthotōn noēmātōn*)

3.80.3, transl. WATERFIELD, with slight adaptations

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- 8 The controversy is evident in the differences in the portrait of Themistocles between Herodotus and Thucydides (see below).
- 9 For Herodotus' strategy of presenting variant versions see Groten 1963; for an overview of variant versions in the *Histories* see Lateiner 1989: 76–90.
- 10 In contrast to later historians, e.g. Plutarch (→), *Them.* 5.1.
- 11 For Xerxes' fear, compare his reaction to the dream that threatens him after reconsidering the invasion of Greece (7.15.1); for his generosity in praise, compare his reaction to Pythius' hospitality (7.29) and for his cruelty in punishment, his cutting in half of Pythius' son (7.39.3).
- 12 Cambyses' anger in each of the variant versions of the origins of the Persian war against Amasis (3.1–3) is another salient example of consistency in characterization.
- 13 For change of character in historiography see Pitcher 2007: 115–117 with references to further literature (mainly on Hellenistic and Roman historiography and biography).

The *Histories* contain various examples of characters that change over the course of time. Cyrus, for instance, attacks the Massagetae in the belief that he is 'more than human' (*pleon ti einai anthrōpou* 1.204.2). At this stage of his career, he has forgotten the Solonian warning that he seemed to understand when it was taught to him by Croesus, namely that he was a human being like any other and therefore subject to the same vicissitudes of fortune (1.86.6). His insight turns out to be fleeting, with lasting consequences for the course of history.¹⁴ As Baragwanath points out, character change adheres to the general principle that nothing remains stable, which Herodotus voices at the end of his introduction (1.5.4).¹⁵

Herodotus' approach to characterizing individuals corresponds to the unrestricted way in which he handles other literary techniques like speeches and detailed description. This liberty is masked behind his pose as a researcher who studies the world around him from a strictly empiricist point of view.¹⁶ It is in his self-advertisement as a *histor* who selects and passes his judgments upon traditions that he creates the manoeuvring space to endow individuals with particular traits. Posing as an empiricist, he takes the stance of an external observer and presents his characters primarily on the basis of their words and deeds.¹⁷ When he moves to the area of the unseen, of private reflection and motivation, he resorts to the technique of giving multiple options, as exemplified by the various interpretations he suggests for Cyrus' reasons to punish Croesus (with fourteen Lydian children) on the pyre,

... as he had in mind either to burn them as first fruits to a certain god, or because he wanted to fulfil a promise, or because he had gathered that Croesus was a pious man he made him mount the pyre, as he wished to know whether one of the gods would protect him against being burnt alive.

1.86.2

14 See Pelling 2006b: 164–165, and n. 86 for Cyrus' forgetfulness of the Solonian wisdom offered to him by Croesus (1.86.5–6). Another prominent individual whose traits change over the course of time is Cleomenes; see Ubsdell 1983: 47–77.

15 Baragwanath 2008: 107–108 and 2015: 20–21. Compare also her useful observations on the various ways in which Herodotus draws attention to unusual aspects of character, in harmony with the *thōmata* that he mentions in his opening words (2015: 19–20).

16 Cf. 2.99. For the way in which Herodotus presents himself in his work as a researcher see Schepens 1980 and *SAGN* 1: 101–114 (de Jong).

17 On the way in which Herodotus poses as an impartial judge in the *Histories*, see Darbo-

Cyrus' motivation for punishing Croesus is explained either in terms of foreign religion or as resulting from his inquisitive nature, a trait of character that Cyrus shares with other kings in the *Histories*.¹⁸ Like in the earlier Xerxes example, Herodotus juxtaposes motivation based on foreign religion with motivation that ties in with the plot structure of his narrative.¹⁹

Overt Characterization in the *Histories*

Explicit comments by the narrator on the characters of individuals in the *Histories* are rare and confined to relatively minor players when they enter his narrative.²⁰ Some of them are qualified as *agathos* ('good', 'brave') or *aristos* ('best', 'excellent'), which sometimes reflects their noble background²¹ but more often points to great achievements on the battlefield.²² Others are praised for their *sophiē* ('wisdom', 'cleverness') because they give useful advice to monarchs²³ or, less often, for their *dikaio sunē* ('righteousness') because their actions attest to honesty and integrity. An example of the latter is Cadmus of Cos, whom the Syracusan tyrant Gelon sends as a messenger to offer gifts and allegiance to Xerxes in the case of a Persian conquest of Greece (7.163–164).²⁴ Herodotus tells how Cadmus voluntarily laid down the tyranny of Cos 'out of righteousness' (7.164.1) and praises 'among his other acts of righteousness' the honest return of the gifts that Gelon had entrusted to him (7.164.2). These acts are exceptional in comparison with regular human behaviour in the *Histories*. No other tyrants

Peschanski 1987: 107–112, Thomas 2000: 235–248, Bakker 2002: 20–28, Cartledge and Greenwood 2002 and *SAGN* 1: 101–114 (de Jong). For Herodotus' empirical attitude see Müller 1981.

18 On this aspect of characterization in the *Histories*, see Christ 1994.

19 See Baragwanath on this passage (2008: 66–67).

20 On these assessments see Westlake 1968: 5–19, who acknowledges their methodological originality within Greek literature.

21 For instance 1.107.2 (Cambyses the elder); 3.68.1 (Otanes).

22 Usually in the formula *anēr agathos* (for instance 1.169.1 (Ionians); 5.2.1 (Perinthians); 6.14.3 (Samian admirals); 6.114 (Callimachus); 6.117.2 (Epizelus); 7.238.2 (men in general); 9.75 (Sophanes)) or *anēr aristos* (7.181.1 (Pytheas); 7.224.1 (Leonidas); 7.226.1 (Dienece)). For a possible link of this formula with funerary rhetoric see Arrington 2011: 187–188.

23 For instance Deioeces (1.96.1), Melampus (2.49.2), Phanes (3.4.2), Oebares (3.85.1), and Anacharsis (4.76.2). Sometimes the qualification is focalized by others than the narrator, for instance in the case of Sandanis (1.71.2), Amyris (6.127.1) and Chilon (7.235.2).

24 Other examples are Mycerinus (2.129.1, in reported narrative), Glaucus (6.86α2, in Leuty-chides' speech, see below).

are mentioned who step down voluntarily; they usually cling to their position, even at the expense of alienating or killing their subjects.²⁵ Similarly, there are various examples of individuals or groups that abuse the trust of others and steal their goods. A salient example is that of the Athenians who refuse to return Aeginetan hostages that Sparta has entrusted to them (6.73.2) as a punishment for Aegina's tokens of surrender to Darius' heralds (6.49). As a consequence, the already existing tensions between Athens and Aegina escalate. Herodotus uses the opportunity to make the Spartan Leutyichides deliver a long, castigating speech to the Athenians, in which he compares their dishonesty to that of the Spartan Glaucus (6.86), who was famed for his *dikaio sunē* (6.86α3). Glaucus merely contemplated not returning a deposit that was entrusted to him by a Milesian and was subsequently punished by the gods, who eradicated his lineage.²⁶

Cadmus is also exceptional in that he does not use his reputation for more self-centred ends, as happens with Deioeces the Mede. Herodotus introduces him as 'a wise man' (*anēr ... sophos*, 1.96.1) who 'fell in love with tyranny' (*eras-theis turannidos*, 1.96.2) and used his reputation of being an 'honest and righteous' judge (*ithus te kai dikaios*, 1.96.2) to win the trust of the Medes, who elected him as their king (1.96.3). A similar example is found in the case of Themistocles, who uses his reputation of being 'wise and of good counsel' (*sophos te kai euboulos*, 8.110.1, cf. 8.124.1) to dissuade the Athenians from pursuing Xerxes on his flight from Greece. Thus, he makes the king indebted to him, as he lets him know—through a secret embassy—that the Persians owe their survival to him as 'best and wisest man of the entire alliance' (*anēr ... tōn summakhōn pantōn aristos kai sophōtatos*, 8.110.3). The same ambassadors subsequently demand exemplary damages from islands in the Aegean; of these the Carystians and Parians obey, as they know that Themistocles was held 'in much praise' (*en ainēi megistēi*, 8.112.2) among the generals. The Athenian keeps the financial compensation for himself as he, in Herodotus' own words, 'could not stop lusting after money' (*ou ... epaueto pleonekteōn*, 8.112.1).²⁷

25 Compare Thrasybulus' advice to Periander in Socles' speech to the Peloponnesians (5.92ζ-η).

26 Compare also the arguments between the Samians and Spartans about the alleged theft of a vessel that the Spartans had sent as a gift to Croesus (1.70.2–3; 3.47.1) and of a linen jerkin sent as a gift to Amasis (3.47.1–3).

27 The principle of using one's reputation for material ends is voiced by Darius in his defence of the use of lies, contrary to Persian custom (3.72.3–5, cf. 1.136.2). For different opinions upon Herodotus' judgement of Themistocles' traits see Barth 1965 and Frost 1980: 9–

The narrator also lavishes exceptional words of praise on Aristides,

a man (*anēr*) from Athens, but ostracized by the people, of whom I am firmly convinced, based on information about his character, that he was the best (*ariston*) man in Athens and the most righteous (*dikaiotaton*).

8.79.1

Aristides' activities in the narrative, however, do not seem to be exceptional enough to merit such praise, and his righteousness in particular remains unmotivated. As for military exploits, Herodotus mentions Aristides' attack upon the Persians at Psyttaleia (8.95) and his role as commander of the Athenians in Plataea (9.28.6), but these feats are relatively modest in comparison with the achievements of compatriots like Miltiades and Themistocles. The personal way in which Herodotus frames his judgement (observe *tōn egō nenomika*, 'of whom I am of the opinion', 8.79.1) points to a contemporary debate about the characters and merits of the Athenian leaders during the Persian war. Traces of this debate are also found in Thucydides' judgement of Themistocles (Thuc. 1.138.3, →), which differs from Herodotus' more negative portrait as it highlights the Athenian's extemporizing talents and foresight.²⁸ Within Herodotus' narrative, the praise for Aristides creates a contrast with his more critical attitude *vis-à-vis* Themistocles, who often succeeds in obtaining his objectives in less pleasant ways, but reaps the harvest of glory after the war, when the Greek commanders award him a crown (8.123–124). There is a faint hint of cynicism in this, as if Herodotus intends to demonstrate—through the evocation of a comparison between Aristides and Themistocles—that righteousness is not always properly acknowledged or rewarded, and that a good dose of amoral ruthlessness may serve as a better means to reach one's end.²⁹

Metaphorical Techniques of Characterization

Herodotus hardly ever evaluates major historical individuals explicitly, but makes their characters apparent from words, deeds and responses in the nar-

10. See Blösel 2004 for a comprehensive treatment of Herodotus' characterization of Themistocles.

28 See Blösel 2012: 232–236.

29 Compare in this respect his characterization of Darius, who is ruthless in his objective to seize the Persian throne. Cf. Bringmann 1976 and below.

rative that can be matched with those of others, within but also beyond the text of the *Histories*.³⁰ Concentrating upon parallels within the text first, I propose a distinction—in Lohmann’s terms—between *äußere* and *übergreifende Komposition*, i.e. characterization by comparison *within* the same scene, and by comparison with other scenes *elsewhere in the narrative*.³¹

In the case of comparison within the same scene, Herodotus makes his characters respond to the same situation in different ways in order to bring out their individual traits.³² He employs this method in his narrative of the Persian conspiracy against the Magi to characterize the young Darius. When introduced within the circle of conspirators, he favours a course of action without delay (3.71.2), is ready to betray his fellow-conspirators (3.71.5), and promotes the forsaking of the typically Persian custom of truth-telling (cf. 1.136.1; 138.2) if his goals can also be reached by manipulation (3.72.4–5). Herodotus stages Otanes as an opponent who insists on more time and on widening the circle of conspirators (3.71.3). By inviting the narratee to compare the conspirators, Herodotus brings out Darius’ ruthlessness more sharply, a character trait that explains how he wins the kingship and succeeds in reorganizing the empire that Cyrus and Cambyses have left him. He also contrasts Darius’ attitude with that of his fellow-conspirator Gobryas, who appeals to Persian feelings of heroism, urging the others to reclaim the throne or die an honourable death (3.73.1–3). During the battle with the Magi, it is indeed Gobryas who is staged as a hero in ordering Darius to strike either himself or the Magus with whom he is fighting in a dark chamber of the palace (3.77.4–5). Finally, Herodotus presents Prexaspes in this scene as a third foil to Darius. Being no part of the conspiracy, he is invited by the Magi, who confide their identity to him and ask him to assuage the Persian people outside the palace (3.74). Prexaspes, however, reveals the truth about the illegal reign of the Magi and throws himself from the wall (3.75). In contrast to Darius, he refuses to forsake the Persian custom of truth-telling, and, like Gobryas, he is willing to pay the ultimate price. Contrasting characters in this passage evokes reflection upon the recipe for a successful *coup d’état*. It appears as though, for Herodotus, heroism and a

30 Cf. Baragwanath 2015: 24. An exception is the Persian qualification of their kings: Darius as ‘merchant’ (*kapēlos*), Cambyses as ‘despot’ (*despotēs*), and Cyrus as ‘father’ (*patēr*) as recorded by Herodotus after Darius’ accession (3.89.3).

31 See Lohmann’s study of the speeches in the *Iliad* (1970), in which he analyses their internal structure (*innere Komposition*), their structure in relation to other speeches within the same scene (*äußere Komposition*) and elsewhere in the narrative (*übergreifende Komposition*).

32 The tragedians use the same technique (Aeschylus, →; Sophocles, →).

readiness to die are in themselves not enough. Ruthlessness and willingness to manipulate are equally, if not more important in making such an operation a success.³³

A variant of this contrasting technique is Herodotus' method of describing characters' differing reactions to the same situation at *different* moments in history. This is exemplified in Herodotus' account of Darius' and Xerxes' reactions upon seeing a massive golden statue in a Babylonian sanctuary. Both kings want to take it away for themselves, but Darius manages to restrain himself whereas Xerxes kills the priest and takes the statue (1.183.2–3). Early on in the *Histories*, this anecdote has the effect of 'primacy', as it anticipates the predatory nature of Darius' and Xerxes' kingships, but also the more restrained way in which Darius handled the subjected states. Their different attitudes hint at a possible reason why Darius' reign is more successful and long-lasting than Xerxes's.

Moving from *äußere* to *übergreifende Komposition*, traits can also become apparent by staging different individuals in similar scenes. The most common way this is done in the *Histories* is through the adviser scene, which exposes an addressee's character—often a king or tyrant—by his response to the advice.³⁴ Herodotus' frequent use of this scene enables him to evoke comparison. He highlights Cambyses' volatile character, for instance, through the nature of his reactions to his adviser Croesus. When he asks the grandees in his retinue how he compares to his father Cyrus, they reply that he is better, as he is king of a larger empire. Croesus disagrees, believing Cambyses not to be equal yet, as he has 'not yet left a son such as he left you' (3.34.5). This should be seen as an implicit warning, since Cambyses has just murdered his—allegedly pregnant—sister and wife (3.32.4). Cambyses, however, 'enjoys' (*hēsthē*) Croesus' words (3.34.5). When he thereupon murders the son of Prexaspes and buries twelve Persians alive (3.35), Croesus attempts to assuage him, imploring him not to 'commit everything to his age and temperament', as this will cause a revolt (3.36.1–2). Despite Croesus' careful phrasing and 'benevolence' (*eunoīē*, 3.36.2), Cambyses this time responds angrily, pointing out to Croesus how he failed as king and as adviser to Cyrus, and tries to kill him with his bow (3.36.3–4). His attempt is foiled, however, and when the king has calmed down he is glad

33 For other examples of this technique, compare the observations on Themistocles and Aristides above and on the debates at Xerxes' court (7.8–11) below. On a larger scale observe Herodotus' overview of the different ways in which the Greek states respond to Xerxes' invasion (7.131–174).

34 For overviews of the different types of wise advisers in the *Histories*, see Bischoff 1932 and Lattimore 1939.

to hear that Croesus has survived (3.36.6). This sequence of advice is primarily meant to give insight into Cambyses' reign of terror, as, in Herodotus' version at least, he was led by his whims and behaved increasingly as a madman.³⁵ The contrast is striking with the sensibility of his predecessor Cyrus, who is willing to listen to others. The latter puts in place Croesus' recommendations to end the plundering of Sardes by manipulating the Persians into handing over their booty (1.89–90.1). He evaluates Croesus' words as typical of a fellow-king, who is willing to perform 'useful deeds and words' (*khṛēsta erga kai epea poieein*, 1.90.1) and makes him into his counsellor. In this position, Croesus offers another practical recommendation on the rebellious Lydians (1.155.3–4), advising Cyrus to have them change their customs. His words again betray the perspective of a monarch able to manipulate his subjects so that they can be ruled more easily, and they are warmly welcomed by Cyrus. The usefulness of these first two recommendations motivates Cyrus' decision to follow Croesus' third, fateful piece of advice about the question of how to fight the Massagetae (1.207). Although Croesus frames his words in Solonian terms, pointing to the cycle of human life and instability of human fortune (cf. 1.32), he does not advise Cyrus to abandon the campaign (1.207.1–2), but to fight the Massagetae in their own land (1.207.3–5). Croesus' advice illustrates, as Pelling argues, the elusiveness of wisdom, as it reveals the Lydian's ability to recollect Solon's words, but by their contrast with the actual advice also highlights his failure to internalize them and to adjust his perspective to their deeper meaning.³⁶ Together with the Persian's over-confidence (1.204.2, see above), it is the limited capacity of Croesus' understanding that contributes to the end of Cyrus' reign.

A final method of metaphorical characterizing concerns the various ways in which the portraits of individuals within the *Histories* are informed by elements from outside and thus evoke comparison. These elements could range from portraits of the same individual in other genres and traditions to a more general relation with characters and ideas known from Greek myth that could serve as a backdrop. Bacchylides' image of Croesus (see above) or Aeschylus' staging of Darius and Xerxes³⁷ are examples of the former, whereas an example of the latter is Herodotus' use of the great heroes of the Trojan War, Achilles

35 I am indebted here to the more in-depth analysis of Cambyses' 'self-absorbed and arbitrary nature of ... reasoning' by Baragwanath (2008: 107–121, quote from p. 118).

36 Pelling points out that Croesus' perspective is limited by his own past experiences (2006b: 164–172). See also Stahl 1975: 21–36.

37 Observe that other authors often write more positively about kings and tyrants. For the Pisistratids compare Thucydides' words of praise (6.54.5), for Cyrus Xenophon's *Cyropaedia* (*passim*) and for Darius Plato's *Laws* (694c–695).

and Hector, to inform his narrative of Leonidas at Thermopylae. By moving from the intratextual to the intertextual, from *übergreifende* to *ausgreifende Komposition*, we are dealing with a subject that is, given the wealth of material within the *Histories*, too extensive to be treated within the scope of this chapter. I therefore confine myself to one example, the way in which Herodotus' portrait of the legendary Athenian lawgiver Solon may have been informed by various external models.

Solon is introduced within the *Histories* as belonging to the 'sophists' (*sophistai*, 1.29.1) that visited Croesus' palace in Sardes at the height of Lydian power. As Moles (1996) has argued, this specific qualification—Herodotus elsewhere only uses it for Pythagoras (4.95.2)—has an anachronistic ring and evokes the image of contemporary Athens as the backdrop against which Solon offers his advice to Croesus. Apart from his canonical status as sage and lawgiver, Herodotus mentions his travelling for the purpose of research (*theōriē*, 1.29.1), which Solon uses as a pretext to force the Athenians to live under their new constitution (1.29.1–2). Croesus repeats this information when he receives Solon in his palace, praising the Athenian by stating

'that you have in your longing for wisdom (*philosopheōn*) come across much land (*gēn pollēn ... epelēluthas*) for the sake of research (*theōriēs*).'

1.30.2

Croesus' flattering words contain an allusion to epic poetry in the expression *gēn pollēn epelēluthēnai*, which Homer uses to describe Menelaus and Odysseus who have travelled across the earth and learnt much about mankind (*Od.* 4.266–270).³⁸ Apart from the contemporary Athenian background, Solon's character is informed by these mythical arch-travellers, which adds to his authority when he addresses Croesus.³⁹ The image, moreover, evokes the way in which Herodotus presents his own travels and research, which makes Solon an *alter ego* of the historian.⁴⁰ Finally, there may be engagement with poetry ascribed to Solon. Herodotus mentions that Croesus' age is 35 at his accession (1.26.1). Croesus reigns for fourteen years and, after a siege that lasts fourteen days (1.86.1), is placed on a pyre with twice seven Lydian youths (1.86.2). This emphasis on the number seven and its multiples evokes an elegy ascribed to

38 Compare *Il.* 15.79–83.

39 Observe that Solon, like Menelaus and Odysseus, visits Egypt (2.177.2). He is also hosted at Cyprus (5.113.2). Compare the portrait of Anacharsis (4.76.2) as traveller and sage.

40 Cf. Arieti 1995: 41 and Moles 1996.

Solon that divides human life in ten periods of seven years, in which the peak lies in the sixth, seventh, and eighth heptomad (from 35 to 56 years). Herodotus makes his Solon hint at the elegy in his speech to Croesus on happiness, which opens with the words that he sets ‘the limit (*ouron*) of life for a human at the age of seventy’ (1.32.2). With *ouros* (Attic *horos*, ‘boundary-stone’), this phrase also contains a reference to Solon’s reforms in Athens, i.e. his moving of the boundary stones in the context of the cancellation of debt-slavery (*seisakththeia*).⁴¹ It appears as if Herodotus has built his character Solon in part upon images that stem from the past, and in part upon ideas that are closer to him in time. Thus he has created a Solon character that bridges the gap between a legendary past and his own contemporary fifth century BCE audience, for whom he believed Solon’s wisdom had many benefits.

Metonymical Techniques of Characterization

Herodotus’ ascription of particular deeds, words, and thoughts to individuals is his most powerful characterizing tool. The analysis here will be confined to a few general observations. For more in-depth studies on these aspects of the *Histories*, I refer to recent publications by Scardino (on speeches, 2007), Baragwanath (on motivation, 2008), Barker (on debates, 2009), Froehlich (on motivation, 2013), and to older seminal publications of Lateiner (especially on tyranny, 1989) and Christ (on kings as investigators, 1994).

Action

When we look at characterization by deeds, hardly any of the more substantially portrayed individuals in the *Histories* keep reputations of integrity throughout their appearances in the narrative. In the case of kings and tyrants, this is self-evident, as Herodotus chose one-man rule and its negative consequences as one of the main themes of his work.⁴² Even individuals like Croesus and Polycrates, who may evoke sympathy because of their euergetism or their portrayal in intimate settings, do not escape unscathed. The story of Croesus ends with the killing of a rival, whom he tortured by ‘dragging him across a carding-comb’ (*epi knaphou helkōn*, 1.92.4). Polycrates’ reign on Samos begins with the murder of his brother Pantagnotus and the exile of his brother Syloson (3.39.2). Herodotus reminds us that these autocrats committed grave

41 Cf. Solon fr. 36, 37 (West). See also Chiasson 1986.

42 Lateiner 1989.

crimes in order to ensure their position of power. Similarly, Herodotus singles out high-born Persian officials for their atrocities, for instance Otanes, who—despite his thoughtful character (see above) and plea to abolish Persian monarchy (3.80)—wipes out the population of Samos (3.147; 149). In the same vein, Oroetes, satrap of Sardes, kills Polycrates out of envy and subsequently rids himself of various Persian officials (3.120–126).⁴³ On the side of the Greeks, Hermotimus' revenge upon Panionius, who castrated him as a boy, is a cruel atrocity. Hermotimus forces him to castrate his own sons and in turn has them castrate him (8.104–106).⁴⁴ It appears as if Herodotus believed that men endowed with power were by their very nature capable of the most atrocious crimes.

Thought and Speech

Herodotus uses the representation of thoughts and speeches to demonstrate his characters' political capacities. This is illustrated by Themistocles' speech to Eurybiades at Salamis (8.60α–γ) after the fall of Athens, when the Greek alliance plans to move to the Isthmus. Themistocles has been advised that this move will lead to the collapse of the alliance, and has shared this opinion privately with Eurybiades (8.58.2). In the subsequent meeting of admirals, however, Themistocles fears that disclosing this concern may give offence (8.60). He therefore adopts a different line of reasoning in his public address to Eurybiades, emphasizing the advantages of fighting in the narrows and the importance of keeping Megara, Aegina and Salamis in allied hands.

Speeches function in a different way. They characterize an individual (or a group of individuals representative of a clan or a polis) in relation to (the network of) their addressee(s),⁴⁵ and thus give an idea of the communication that accompanies (a) particular event(s). Particularly successful in this respect are the speeches held in the meeting at the Persian court at the beginning of the seventh book (7.8–11). In the prelude to this passage, Herodotus describes how Xerxes initially does not wish to prioritize war against Greece (7.5.1), but is persuaded by his cousin Mardonius and Greek lobbyists who seek support in order to regain power at home (7.5–6). In the subsequent debate, Xerxes

43 Compare Artayctes, satrap of the Hellespont, whom Herodotus qualifies as *deinos* and *atasthalos* (9.116.1).

44 For other atrocities committed by Greeks that Herodotus mentions, see Menelaus' sacrifice of two Egyptian children to obtain favourable winds (2.119.2) and the Athenian crucifixion of Artayctes (9.120.4).

45 Observe in this respect Herodotus' artful use of forms of address to qualify the relationships between characters, as analysed by Dickey 1996.

delivers the first speech and argues that he has to follow his predecessors' tradition of enlarging the empire (7.8 α). He announces Greece as his objective, as it enables him to take revenge upon Athens for its support of the Ionian revolt and its victory at Marathon (7.8 β). After arguing that a conquest of Greece will make the entire world into one Persian empire (7.8 γ), he gives specific orders to his subjects (7.8 δ) and rounds off with a request for opinions, as if the decision has not yet been taken:

'And in order that I do not appear to you to decide on my own, I place the topic in your midst, and order that whoever wishes to do so (*ton boulomenon*) should come forward with his opinion.'

7.8 δ 2

Mardonius thereupon speaks in support of the decision, flattering the king and making light of Greek fighting power (7.9). Next, Artabanus tries to dissuade Xerxes, pointing out the poor track record of Persian fighting in Europe (7.10 β - γ) and warning—in veiled terms—against a hubristic undertaking (7.10 δ - ζ). He then rebukes Mardonius for telling lies about the Greeks (7.10 η - θ). Xerxes flies into a rage, telling Artabanus to stay home with the women (7.11.1) and summing up his Achaemenid lineage (7.11.2). Revenge upon the Athenians should be seen as a pre-emptive strike, he claims, to avoid the conquest of the Persians themselves (7.11.2-4).

The debate at the Persian court characterizes its participants via their attitudes and their words. Xerxes lacks the confident authority that is needed to motivate his decision and seeks refuge in overstating the importance of revenge, in repeated appeals to the traditions of his ancestors and eventually in anger. He also tries to raise support by giving the impression of a democratic debate, asking his subjects to speak freely with a formula that resembles that of the opening of the Athenian assembly—who wishes to speak (*tis agoreuein bouletai*)? This odd way of ending an autocrat's speech indicates that he is portrayed as unsure of how to establish his authority most effectively. Mardonius is characterized as a shrewd and manipulative lobbyist, keen on personal glory after his earlier failed campaign to Greece. Artabanus' words to Xerxes parallel those of other advisers, but his bitter invective against Mardonius also reveals that he, as an older statesman, lacks the charisma to bring the sensitive debate to a satisfying conclusion. Altogether, the way in which the individuals interact, their choice of arguments and phrasing, the excessive flattery of Mardonius, the lengthy apology made by Artabanus at the beginning of his speech, and his warning clouded in general, almost proverbial statements, characterize the Persian court as a place of intrigue, and intimidation, in every way the opposite

to the atmosphere of freedom of speech that Xerxes tries to create through his quasi-democratic invitation at the end of his opening speech.⁴⁶

In contrast to Homer (→) and Thucydides (→), Herodotus has not endowed any of his characters with an idiolect.⁴⁷ Rather, it is *types* of characters that are characterized in this way. Thus he sometimes makes kings and tyrants use ‘posh’ Homeric language. Darius twice uses the dactylic closure ‘for it’s not better’ (*ou gar ameinson*, 3.71.2; 3.82.5),⁴⁸ and Croesus’ opening words in the *Histories* also share their diction with poetry:

‘Would that the gods place that in the mind of the islanders, to war against the sons of the Lydians on horses.’ (*ai gar touto theoi poiēseian epi noon nēsiōtēisi, elthein epi Ludōn paidas sun hipposi*)

1.27.3

The use of *ai gar* to introduce a wish and the expressions *poiēin epi noon* (‘place in the mind’) and ‘sons of the Lydians’ are poetical and possibly derived from Homeric poetry.⁴⁹ Similarly, Herodotus often makes his advisers speak in veiled terms, in particular when they address a superior whose reaction may be volatile. They make use of general maxims, such as Solon’s *pan esti anthrōpos sumphorē* (‘man is entirely subject to accident’, 1.32.4)⁵⁰ or of colourful similes that mask their criticism. An example is Artabanus’ veiled warning to Xerxes against the influence of warmongers in his palace:

‘the company of evil men endangers you, in a similar way as they say that storms that hit the sea—of all things the most useful for mankind—do not allow it to use its own nature.’⁵¹

7.16α

46 For a lengthier analysis see de Bakker 2007: 136–159, with references to scholarship on this passage.

47 For Homer see Friedrich and Redfield 1978, for Thucydides see Tompkins 1972.

48 See Hes. *Op.* 750 and cf. Hom. *Il.* 1.217 (*hōs gar ameinson*). The phrase is also found in the inscription in Nitocris’ tomb which exposes Darius as ‘shameless pursuer of profit’ (*aiskhrokerdēs*, 1.187.5).

49 For *ai gar* compare Hom. *Od.* 20.236; for the gods placing a plan in the mind of a man compare Hom. *Il.* 13.732; for the form of address ‘sons of ...’ compare Hom. *Il.* 1.162.

50 On this aspect of the language of advisers see Pelling 2006b.

51 Observe that the simile alludes to Solon’s fragment 12 (West): ‘the sea is brought into turmoil by winds. If no one causes it to move, it is the most righteous element of all’.

Without mentioning Mardonius and the Greek lobbyists explicitly, and by comparing the king to an element that is by nature useful, Artabanus issues a warning without making Xerxes suffer a loss of face.

In a similar way, Herodotus typifies the ethnic background of his characters by way of their speech. This holds especially for the Ionians and the Athenians, whose rhetorical capacities he underlines through their speeches, and for the Spartans, whose words are laconic and devoid of rhetorical embellishment. This creates a humorous effect when representatives of both parties meet in debate, as happens when Aristagoras' lengthy oration to raise Spartan support for the Ionian revolt (5.49.2–8) is answered by Cleomenes with the briefest of replies:

'Stranger from Miletus, I adjourn my reply to you until the day after tomorrow.'⁵²

5.49.9

In the case of the Ionians and Athenians, the integrity of their rhetoric is often undermined by the narrative context. A dramatic example is found in the interlude between the battles of Salamis and Plataea, when the Persians seek to win over the Athenians by sending Alexander of Macedon who delivers a lengthy plea with words from Xerxes, Mardonius and himself (8.140). The Athenians refuse with a reference to

'the Greek world, being related by blood (*homaimon*) and related by language (*homoglōsson*), and the communal places of worship and sacrifice for the gods, and our characters that are of the same manner (*homotropa*), of which it could in no way be the case that the Athenians betrayed them.'

8.144.2

Not much later, however, this idealism is undermined when the Spartans procrastinate in organizing their support for the alliance. Eventually they send out their army under Pausanias without telling the Athenian ambassadors, who are still waiting for an official reply in Sparta (9.10). They accuse the Spartans of treachery and announce that the Athenians will ally themselves with the Persians, fighting together with them 'against whomever they march out' (9.11.2). Only at this late stage do the ephors reveal the dispatch of their army. The way

52 For other examples of Ionians having trouble in communicating with the Spartans when they meet one another see 1.152, 3.46, 3.148.

in which Herodotus has structured the narrative and speeches of this episode characterizes the cooperation of the Greek states against the Persians as lacking trust and being devoid of Panhellenic idealism, and anticipates the deterioration of Greek interstate relationships in the period after the Persian War.

Conclusion: Herodotus' Multiple Methods of Characterization

The overview of the most important techniques of characterization within the *Histories* demonstrates Herodotus' versatility as a historiographer. Posing as an empirical observer of past events, he gives the impression of assessing his characters with a steady hand according to their deeds and words, but in fact takes literary liberties in characterizing individuals so that they contribute to his important themes, such as his stance against one-man rule and opposition to internecine fighting among the Greeks. For the same purpose, he invites the narratee to reflect upon similarities and differences between characters by staging them together within the same or a similar scene, or by deriving aspects of their characterization from sources outside the *Histories*. Aided by these techniques, Herodotus creates a wide cast of divergent characters, in whom he highlights the full complexity of human behaviour. He shows that the free Greek world is in many ways not much different from the courts of kings and tyrants, and that both settings abound in intrigue, manipulation and hostility. Finally, he draws attention to his own Protean struggle in gathering and evaluating the wealth of traditions that informed his unique work.