

CHAPTER
3

HISTORYMAKERS **Herodotus**
Father of History

Section 3

“This is the demonstration of the research of Herodotus of Halicarnassus.”
—Herodotus, opening line of the Histories

Herodotus was one of the first people to try to explain the past. For this, he became known as the “father of history.” Many historians have been uncomfortable about that label, because the history written by Herodotus has many flaws. Nevertheless, with his *Histories*, Herodotus created a new form of study. Indeed, the name of this field—history—was coined by him. In his native Greek, it means “inquiries” or “research.” Not much is known about the life of this first historian. He was born about 484 B.C. in Halicarnassus, a city in Asia Minor that was settled by Greeks. His family was well-off but suffered at the hands of the tyrant who ran the government of that city. They were forced to leave for an island while Herodotus was still young. Later in life, he returned to his home to help overthrow the tyrant, but he did not stay.

Herodotus has been described as curious. One later writer called him “a man who could not cross the street without finding something interesting.” He traveled a great deal throughout the area, going as far as the Black Sea, Syria, Babylon, Palestine, and Egypt. The reason for this travel is unknown. He may have been engaged in trade, a common enough pursuit for Greeks of his time. Whatever the reason, he constantly asked questions of the people he met. In this way he gained understanding of the customs and traditions of people in other lands. About 450, he went to live in Athens, where he became close friends with the famous playwright Sophocles. Later, he moved to a Greek colony in southern Italy. He lived there until the end of his life, which was some time around 420 B.C.

Scholars are unsure when Herodotus began writing his history, how long it took, or in what order the parts were written. It is clear that he was already at work on it when he lived in Athens. There are reports that he read parts of it aloud while he lived in that city.

Herodotus’ main purpose was to tell the story of the conflict between Persia and the Greek city-states in the early years of the fifth century B.C. His book

describes the Persian invasions and the Greeks’ unexpected victory. The first third relates the rise of Persia. The middle third details the beginning of the Persian-Greek conflict up to the Battle of Marathon. The last third chronicles the massive invasion launched by Persian leader Xerxes in 480–479 and the ultimate Persian defeat. The work includes much more, however. Herodotus presents a great deal of background information on the roots of Persian and Greek society before the two peoples ever clashed. In addition, the portion called Book Two is a long and detailed passage about Egypt. It includes accounts of Egyptian history as well as his observations of life and customs in that land.

To many historians, though, Herodotus’ book is frustrating. He pays little attention to chronology—the sequence of events over time. He also includes many stories that bring in unbelievable elements, including the actions of the gods.

With these problems, what makes the work a history? First, Herodotus keeps his eye on the story that he wants to tell. Despite wandering off to cover side topics, he still conveys the main events. Second, he tells his story with some objectivity. He is able to distance himself from the persons whose actions he describes and comment on them in a fair way. Third, although he was, for the most part, a poor judge of sources, he did attempt to assess their reliability. Fourth, he does try to offer insights about the causes and effects of events, even though his analysis is somewhat naive and superficial. Finally, he accomplishes all these goals with a graceful and charming writing style.

Questions

- Making Inferences** Why do you think Herodotus would call his work “researches” or “inquiries”?
- Analyzing Motives** If Herodotus was a Greek, was it possible for him to be completely objective in his history? Explain.
- Developing Historical Perspective** What do you think are the characteristics that make a piece of writing a history?