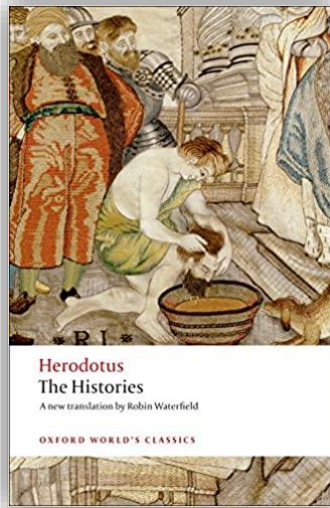


## BOOK REVIEW

### *The Histories*

By Herodotus

Reviewed by Jacob Winn



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*The Histories*, by Herodotus, is one of our earliest sources of anthropological information. Written in the 5th century BCE, the writing was not primarily a work of anthropology, and indeed to see it as an explicitly anthropological work would be highly anachronistic. Nevertheless, while *The Histories* is indeed a work of history first and foremost, Herodotus is fascinating in his inclusion of various types of information that one can look back on and fairly classify as geographic, naturalistic, and certainly anthropological in nature. His all-encompassing work has left us many treasures to sort through.

The narrative of the nine books which make up *The Histories* focuses primarily on the Greco-Persian Wars and some of the characters involved. Most relevant to our interests here, however, is a repeating habit of Herodotus when introducing a culture to the narrative: he digresses for a time, exploring the culture in question, sharing a number of the customs and

traditions therein. It is within these digressions that the vast majority of the anthropological information is presented to the reader. While much of Herodotus's information is certainly secondhand, and thus his reports are undoubtedly filled with hearsay and some amount of spurious information (which Herodotus himself readily alludes to throughout the writing), his insights are nonetheless some of the very few shreds of written information we have about the practices of some ancient cultures such as the Thracians, various Scythian groups, and several others.

His examination of those various Scythians, in Book Four, serves as a good example of Herodotus's approach to the cultures he writes about. He covers a wide range of elements from Scythian culture, particularly Scythian religious practices, from their sacrificial practices (254), to their divination practices (256-257), to the highly ceremonial way in which they buried their kings (258-259). We can learn a fair amount about the sacred practices of cultures of the distant past from the valuable texts of the time that we have preserved for us still today, texts such as *The Histories*.

At times, Herodotus offers the reader glimpses of specific religious movements, these accounts occasionally serving as our main source for movements long made obsolete by the passage of time, such as the insight he offers into the ancient religion of Salmoxis (who is also known as "Gebeleizis" or "Zalmoxis"), a Thracian who promised his followers immortality before descending underground and emerging three years later, and whose beliefs were carried on by his followers long after his time (266-267). At certain points such as this, Herodotus's relative brevity is quite tantalizing. The reader is left asking a number of questions, the answers to which are not made explicit in the text. In this instance, we may find ourselves asking questions such as these: Who really was this Salmoxis, the figure behind the legend? How did he gain a religious following? Apart from the aforementioned promises of immortality, what were his

teachings? While Herodotus paints vivid pictures of a variety of things, sometimes instead he offers us merely a glimpse.

While the religious elements of Herodotus's anthropological reports are of the highest interest to me, and often seem to be of the highest interest to Herodotus, he covers a wide range of cultural elements. One can find a treasure-trove of various practices in *The Histories*, including cultural elements such as Babylonian marriage practices (p. 86), Egyptian crocodile-hunting (p. 122-123), the spread of the alphabet from Phoenicia to Greece (p. 324-325) and much more. In short, *The Histories* contains an eclectic collection of information on various ancient cultures. Much of this is indeed religious in nature, but one must remember that Herodotus wrote in a time in which the religious pervaded every aspect of life.

Most of the people that Herodotus wrote about existed in his own time, while today they exist to us primarily in memory. But even that memory would be robbed of us, its embers snuffed out in primordial silence beyond our collective recollection, if not for the work Herodotus has left to posterity. Though we can no longer go and visit them in the way that a contemporary of Herodotus would have been able to do, we can at least view them through the small window in time and space that is fashioned for us by *The Histories*.

The role of history in anthropological discourse is one which should not be underplayed or undervalued. We exist within a continuum of time which moves ever-forward, and what we explore today will be consigned to history tomorrow. What is now "yesterday" was once "today," and on and on it goes. Those who went before us were no less alive in their day than we are in ours, and their practices were no less valid or relevant or worthy of discussion and examination.

Finally, there are portions of *The Histories* that serve as some of our best examples of proto-anthropology. While Herodotus certainly did not set out to write an anthropological work, as anthropology as a well-defined field of study was still a long way away, he did a notable amount of anthropological work nonetheless.

It is important that we cherish these writings as some of our only links to humankind of the past. As a believer in Christ, I think it is important for us to honor all of God's creation, and all of humankind created in God's image, in the past, present, and future. Just as we can see God's handiwork upon the diverse array of

human cultures in the world today, we can also admire God's imprint upon those cultures of the past, the way they lived, their modes of being, and their approaches to the divine. All of human life is but a vapor, so perhaps we are not as far removed from the ancient cultures of our past as we may think! In any case, Herodotus has left a wonderful gift to posterity with his magnum opus, *The Histories*.



**Jacob Winn** is a graduate student in Eastern University's Theological and Cultural Anthropology Program. He is also a ministry worker, having spent the past six years involved in ministries of various kinds. He enjoys reading history, philosophy, and theology, and hopes to write extensively in the future. He also has his sights set on a future in academia, in addition to his ongoing ministry work.

Author email: [jacob.winn@eastern.edu](mailto:jacob.winn@eastern.edu)

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