

Joel Alden Schlosser: *Herodotus in the Anthropocene*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020. Pp. 191.)

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Herodotus's insatiable delight in human diversity takes him across "the known world" of the eastern Mediterranean, in person and in imagination. Mostly he comes not to judge different societies, but to wonder at their variety, from the horse-riding Scythians to the neckless Blemmyes with their faces on their chests. Central to his panorama are the various Greek states and their mutual enemy, the Persians. Yet Herodotus insists that these disparate peoples are not ultimately inscrutable to one another. Regardless of superficial differences and violent hostilities, all peoples share a common attribute. For David Grene, translator of Herodotus's *The History*, that shared quality is piety, the wordless sense of the divine at the heart of each and every human community. Despite our different rites and names for the gods, Herodotus believes, "all men know equally about the divine" (*The History*, trans. Grene [University of Chicago Press, 1987], 29). We can recognize and even appreciate one another because of this universal sense of reverence.

Joel Alden Schlosser catches the spirit of Grene's celebration of Herodotus, but discerns in his history a different basis for our underlying unity. In Schlosser's reading, this shared quality is not piety, but the *nomos*, the patterns "of collective life including both humans and non-humans" (5). Each society's *nomos* is different because it consists of a combination of the human (particularly political institutions) and the nonhuman (rivers, gods, fate, camels, contingency, and cosmic principles, among other things). These units of humans-and-nonhumans, the political-and-the-nonpolitical, shape the possibilities and limits of freedom (*eleutheria*), and thus each society will differ in configuration but not in kind. Each *nomos*, then, is like any other in being rooted in its local habitat and in relations with neighboring *nomoi*, but distinguished by its own ecologically rooted political choices. Schlosser argues, "Because *nomoi* are not just human-made things but arise in dynamic and responsive interaction with non-human things, . . . the particular freedom realized by a people arises within a particular ecology of things" (114). Schlosser interprets Herodotus as appreciating many types of freedom—Spartan, Persian, Athenian, Scythian, and Ionian—but judging Athenian democracy best at ensuring unity and bravery. Freedom, however, is not Herodotus's highest good. Rather, Herodotus values the capacity of *nomos* to enhance the well-being of all things: "because of his concern with nonhuman as well as human things, Herodotus orients freedom toward a higher goal: earthly flourishing" (114). In short, Schlosser gives us an ecological Herodotus.

This fresh and interesting approach to Herodotus reinvigorates his history, but what, you may ask, does this ecological view have to do with the

Anthropocene? In a word, nothing. Suppose a biologist wrote a book called *Aristotle and the Microbiome*. As with *Herodotus and the Anthropocene*, the title itself would intrigue. It would suggest the breadth of the author's transdisciplinary imagination and desire to put the classical world in dialogue with a contemporary, scientifically grounded concept. Aristotle, of course, was a naturalist interested in classifying organisms, and the microbiome refers to the recent discovery of the importance of bacteria, fungi, protozoa, and viruses to the web of life. Indeed, by count, most of the cells in "our" human bodies are not human but microbial and essential to our well-being, making a healthy human being into a kind of multispecies organism. What could be more intellectually exciting than to bridge disciplinary divides and speak from the perspective of the classics to such fascinating contemporary discoveries? But suppose, on closer examination, that this biologist had not actually read any Aristotle, nor even interpretations of Aristotle by classicists. What if he had relied solely on commentaries by fellow biologists? The book would then hardly be a reliable guide to ancient thought, notwithstanding its catchy title. A similar problem plagues *Herodotus and the Anthropocene*. While much that is said about Herodotus is intriguing, there is no evidence of engagement with the geology or Earth System science behind the proposed Anthropocene. Nothing in the text or the bibliography suggests even a glancing acquaintance with the scientific literature. The result is a missed opportunity. We get an ecological Herodotus suitable for a 1970s understanding of "the environment," but nothing that speaks to our radically altered Earth System.

The proposed Anthropocene is a new unit of geological time beginning with the global, near synchronous strata laid down by human activities in the mid-twentieth century. If accepted, it would join other intervals on the geologic time scale that charts Earth's changes for its entire 4.54 billion year existence. The Anthropocene is closely related to the discovery by Earth System scientists that our planet is nearing a state shift dangerous to human well-being. With this concept, scientists are describing a predicament that is systemic, irreversible, global, and quite recent. Schlosser, on the other hand, describes the Anthropocene as "the new reality—which is really quite old" (4) and says nothing about the planetary. Instead, the phrase "dynamic complexity" is repeated with incantatory frequency as though it were a synonym for "Anthropocene."

Parsing "dynamic complexity" reveals its inadequacy. First, there are two distinctive types of dynamism—negative and positive—relevant to understanding geological intervals. Negative feedback loops stabilize the planetary system around a mean. During the Holocene epoch, beginning about 11,700 years ago, negative feedback loops permitted human societies to flourish. The climate fluctuated slightly; creatures evolved; landscapes altered, but it was all within a manageable narrow range. The second type of dynamism, produced by positive feedback loops, destabilizes the Earth System, and sends it careening along difficult-to-predict trajectories with potential tipping points. The Anthropocene, characterized by a destabilized Earth System, is

the result of the wrong *type* of dynamism. Schlosser glosses over this crucial distinction and instead praises dynamism *per se*.

His second term, “complexity,” is equally problematic. In almost all vital respects, the Anthropocene represents an alarming *decrease* in complexity, most notably in biodiversity. The web of life is being thinned out though the loss of species and the rapidly diminishing numbers of individuals within remaining species. This simplification threatens to become the Sixth Great Extinction event. One of the Anthropocene’s few increases in complexity is the extraordinary rise in human-created minerals in the past half century or so. The more than 193,000 human-made “inorganic crystalline compounds” (as they are called) vastly outnumber Earth’s ~5000 natural minerals. With respect to new minerals, the Anthropocene has no parallels on any other planet in the solar system—and perhaps with any planet in the cosmos, a complexity that endangers, rather than enhances, our well-being. (See P. J. Heaney, “Defining Minerals in the Age of Humans,” *American Mineralogist* 102, no. 5 [2017]: 925–26.)

In other words, the “dynamic complexity” that confronted Herodotus is entirely different from the “dynamic complexity” we contend with in the Anthropocene. One was beneficial; the other hazardous. Can Herodotus still serve as a guide in our new, disorienting world? He could, but only once the nature of this new world is understood. Schlosser praises Herodotus’s sense of wonder and his persistent inquiry into things, without applying these qualities in his own research. Such curiosity would entail a deep dive into contemporary science. It could also lead to asking how the new Earth System creates a different type of *nomoi*, different limits to our freedoms, and altered potentials for earthly flourishing. For these crucial questions of the Anthropocene, Herodotus might serve as an excellent guide, and it would be fascinating to follow his lead.

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Eli Friedland: *The Spartan Drama of Plato’s “Laws.”* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2020. Pp. xii, 193.)

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Modern scholars have neglected Plato’s *Laws* for various reasons: it is inordinately long, and the dialogue’s argument is said to wander from topic to topic.