

THE LYDIAN *LOGOS* OF HERODOTUS 1.50–2*

Chapters 50–2 of Herodotus' first book have been relatively neglected by scholars, presumably because they appear at first glance simply to list Croesus' sacrificial offerings at Delphi, rather than operating as a narrative imbued with the tragic motifs that scholars have long admired and explored in the Lydian *logos* as a whole.¹ Only H. W. Parke has paid attention to these chapters, and even he considers them only from the perspective of Herodotus' historical veracity.² Caroline Dewald, in an article on the misleading power of objects in Herodotus, does not include 1.50–2 in her discussion,³ while Gregory Crane notes that Herodotus' list is 'surprisingly detailed', but can only explain its specificity in terms of the presumed general appeal of such a list to his contemporaries.⁴ This note will suggest, however, that, as well as simply documenting Croesus' spectacular offerings, the narrative of these chapters is also shaped by some fundamental themes that run through the whole Croesus story.

Chapters 1.50–2 list the spectacular offerings that Croesus sends to Delphi to propitiate the oracle so that he can receive its approval for his prospective attack on Cyrus. In preparation, he sacrifices 3,000

* I would like to thank the anonymous reader of this piece for patiently helping me to rethink some of my initial assumptions and for greatly improving my arguments. All translations are my own.

¹ These have been well documented: see, in particular, C. C. Chiasson, 'Herodotus' Use of Attic Tragedy in the Lydian Logos', *CLAnt* 22 (2003), 5–35; S. Said, 'Herodotus and Tragedy' in E. J. Bakker, I. J. F. de Jong, and H. van Wees (eds.), *Brill's Companion to Herodotus* (Leiden, Boston, MA, and Cologne, 2002), 117–47; H. P. Stahl, 'Learning Through Suffering? Croesus' Conversations in the History of Herodotus', *YClS* 24 (1975), 6. C. B. R. Pelling, 'Educating Croesus: Talking and Learning in Herodotus' Lydian Logos', *CLAnt* 25 (2006), 159–60, discusses Homeric influence on Herodotus.

² H. W. Parke, 'Croesus and Delphi', *GRBS* 25 (1984), 209–32. The same exclusive focus on Herodotus' factual accuracy is true also of commentators such as Asheri in D. Asheri, A. Lloyd, A. Corcella, O. Murray, and A. Moreno, *Herodotus. Books I–IV* (Oxford, 2007), 110–13.

³ C. Dewald, 'Reading the World: The Interpretation of Objects in Herodotus' *Histories*', in R. Rosen and J. Farrell (eds.), *Nomodeiktes. Festschrift for Martin Ostwald* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1993), 63 and 65 n. 18.

⁴ G. S. Crane, 'The Prosperity of Tyrants: Bacchylides, Herodotus, and the Contest for Legitimacy', *Arethusa* 29 (1996), 56.

animals and burns golden and silver couches, golden cups, and purple clothing in addition, even demanding that his Lydian subjects also make a contribution (1.50.2, 51.1). From the metal yielded by the sacrifice, he makes a golden lion, some 600 pounds in weight, standing on 4½ bricks of pure gold, each weighing about 150 pounds, which themselves stood on a pyramidal structure of 113½ bricks of electrum, each weighing about 120 pounds.⁵ Herodotus goes on to record the subsequent history of the golden lion: when Delphi was burned, it fell from its plinth, losing a portion of its weight as the fire melted the gold, and now a slightly diminished lion sits in the Corinthians' treasury. This vast sacrifice is followed by yet more offerings to Delphi: a gold mixing bowl, weighing almost as much as the lion, and a silver one capable of holding 600 amphoras (something like 6,000 gallons). Herodotus offers further information about them, such as their original placement in the temple before the fire at Delphi and the alleged provenance of the silver bowl from the workshop of Theodorus of Samos, a provenance that he accepts for such an impressive piece. This is not the end of it: Herodotus mentions four silver storage jars, and lustral vases, one silver and one gold. Again, he offers extra details about the history of the gold bowl: though an inscription claims that it is Spartan, it too was originally from Croesus, and the Spartan inscription was the work of a man from Delphi whose name Herodotus knows but will not reveal. Finally, Herodotus lists some round cast objects of silver, a golden statue of a woman five and a half feet tall, and Croesus' wife's necklaces and belts. Once the oracle has given its fatal prophecy that Croesus will destroy a great empire if he makes the expedition, the king offers every inhabitant of Delphi two gold *staters* as a thank-you present (54.1).

Croesus' donations are far greater and more varied than those of his predecessors, such as Gyges, who presented Delphi with six golden bowls of 360 pounds each (Hdt. 1.14.2). Parke comments on the remarkably numerous and miscellaneous character of these offerings, and the discrepancy between what Croesus offers and what we know of normal practice in propitiating oracles. He cites a letter from Seleucus Nicator regarding offerings to Apollo's shrine at Delphi, which lists ten articles of gold and two of silver, whose total weight is a fraction of Croesus' offering and which, importantly, lack any one

⁵ All measurements come from Parke (n. 2).

exceptional piece, in contrast to the list of Croesus' offerings, which include the lion, the vast bowls, and the golden woman, any of which would be an outstanding item on its own. It seems very likely that these offerings were not given all at once in the context of Croesus' projected attack on Cyrus, but over a period of time.⁶

Herodotus considers them all one offering, however, and there are several reasons why he does so, all of which, in this apparently uncomplicated list, exemplify related and recurring tendencies in his *Histories*. First, to imagine all these gifts as one extraordinarily generous offering clearly puts Croesus' contribution into the category of the 'wonders' whose memory Herodotus wishes to preserve for posterity (*praef.*).⁷ Second, his awareness of his own achievement in saving such wonders from oblivion and taking over the power of Homer's Muses to confer κλέος upon human achievement⁸ strongly influences chapters 50–2. Herodotus' pride in his extensive knowledge of the contents of Delphi's fabulous inventory of offerings is clear in this passage and he is keen to exhibit it with many details – the lion was once larger, the bowls were later moved, and so on – which are not strictly necessary to the factual narrative of Croesus' actions but show off the historian's sense of his own power as a chronicler.⁹ The inclusion of these apparently extraneous details strongly suggests that Herodotus' knowledge of Croesus' offerings was derived from autopsy, whose value is frequently stressed in the *Histories*.¹⁰ Similarly, the emphasis laid on the mutability of the objects exemplifies some larger thematic tendencies in Herodotus' writings. His power to preserve is in eternal tension with the natural tendency of things to change (1.5.4),¹¹ and these objects that are diminished or

⁶ Parke (n. 2), 217 n. 14.

⁷ Herodotus explicitly states that his writings are motivated by his desire that great and amazing deeds, whether of Greeks or barbarians (ἔργα μεγάλα τε καὶ θαυμαστά, τὰ μὲν Ἕλλησι τὰ δὲ βαρβάροισι ἀποδεχθέντα), should not be forgotten.

⁸ On the connections between Herodotus' programmatic first sentence and his intentions as a historian, see E. J. Bakker, 'The Making of History: Herodotus' *Histories Apodexis*', in Bakker, de Jong, and van Wees (n. 1), 2–32.

⁹ Caroline Dewald, 'I Didn't Give My Own Genealogy: Herodotus and the Authorial Persona', in Bakker, de Jong, and van Wees (n. 1), 268, characterizes his voice as the 'expert's persona'. Herodotus' sense of his own expertise is particularly evident in his statement at 1.51.4 that, though he knows the name of the man who carved the Spartan inscription on Croesus' golden bowl, he chooses not to reveal it.

¹⁰ See H. Flower, 'Herodotus and Delphic Traditions about Croesus', *BICS Supplement* 58 (1991), 66–9. On the strong connection between autopsy and historical authority, see J. Marincola, *Authority and Tradition in Ancient Historiography* (Cambridge, 1997), 63–7.

¹¹ τὰ γὰρ τὸ πάλαι μεγάλα ἦν, τὰ πολλὰ σμικρὰ αὐτῶν γέγονε: τὰ δὲ ἐπ' ἑμεῦ ἦν μεγάλα, πρότερον ἦν σμικρὰ. τὴν ἀνθρωπίνην ὧν ἐπιστάμενος εὐδαιμονίην οὐδαμῶν ἐν τούτῳ μένουσαν,

moved, or whose very provenances can be so complex that only an experienced and knowledgeable interpreter can fully understand them, exemplify the difficulties inherent in the task he has set himself.

What is even more interesting is the way in which the narrative emphasizes the unparalleled abundance of Croesus' offerings, which goes well beyond normal practice, even for wealthy foreigners, much less ordinary Greeks. Croesus' resources contrast with the far more modest circumstances of both Tellus, Solon's happiest man – 'well off, at least by our standards of living' (Hdt. 1.30.4) – and the runners-up, Cleobis and Biton, who had 'enough resources to live on' (1.31.2). Unlike those of Croesus, their good fortune and resources maintain a level appropriate to human beings. Even though generous sacrifice *per se* should be an act of piety, that of Croesus is so far beyond normal practice that it stands out in the *Histories*, and, as its origin is Croesus' outstanding political and economic power, it makes Croesus stand out. Standing out is never desirable in a world in which divinity is jealous and apt to stir things up (1.32.1), and where lightning bolts strike the tallest houses and tallest trees first (7.10.e; cf. 1.207.2, 3.40.2, 4.202–5). The lavishness of the donations may also reflect the materially based viewpoint which is closely, and damagingly, linked to Croesus' sense of invulnerable prosperity.¹²

And so, just as Croesus is making his best efforts to secure support for his ventures from the god by making extraordinarily generous offerings, it is their extraordinary generosity that apparently makes him the target of the mysterious forces which also target the tallest houses and trees.¹³ Now that his exceptional prosperity is so explicitly demonstrated, Croesus is extremely vulnerable to reverse, and the beginning of the

ἐπιμνήσομαι ἀμφοτέρων ὁμοίως ('For much of what was previously great has become small and things that were great in my time were once small. So, knowing that human prosperity never stays the same, I shall mention both of these in the same way'). Cf. 1.207.2.

¹² Material reciprocity is important to Croesus: at 1.41.1–2, he requires Adrastus to repay him for the good he has received, and at 1.90.4, he blames the oracle for being 'ungrateful' after everything he has lavished upon it: Croesus' fate shows the dangers of relying on such simplistic materialism. I owe this point to the anonymous reader of this piece.

¹³ The relationship between Herodotus' Solon's characterization of 'the divine' as subject to jealousy (1.32.1) and his editorial comment that Croesus met a bad end because he thought himself to be the luckiest man alive (1.34.1) is complex, perhaps deliberately unclear, and lies outside the scope of this article; see, however, Pelling (n. 1), 148–53. But S. O. Shapiro, 'Herodotus and Solon', *CLAnt* 8 (1996), 355, convincingly argues that Herodotus broadly endorses Solon's famous characterization of the divine as 'jealous', because every prediction of disaster after some excess is indeed fulfilled in his narrative; see also C. C. Chiasson, 'The Herodotean Solon', *GRBS* 27 (1986), 261.

sequence of events in which he loses all his material prosperity¹⁴ is almost instantaneous. Chapters 53–4 describe Croesus' question about the attack on Cyrus, the oracle's response, and Croesus' delighted reaction: the telling word *ὑπερήσθη* ('he was overjoyed') is used (54.1).¹⁵ Then, since the oracle recommends alliance with the most powerful of the Greeks, Herodotus weaves an account of the Spartans and the Athenians and their antecedents into the Croesus *logos*, returning to his main storyline at 1.71, where it becomes clear that the end is already near. Herodotus prefaces his account of Croesus' expedition to Cappadocia with the statement 'Croesus, *who had misunderstood the oracle*, was preparing an expedition to Cappadocia, assuming that he would depose Cyrus.' This expedition is evidently motivated by yet another of the mistaken interpretations of oracles and signs that have plagued Croesus throughout this narrative (1.73.1; see also 1.34.1–40.1, 53.3, 55–56.1), because of the excessive confidence in his own position that makes him fail to analyse them effectively, as Delphi will ultimately force him to acknowledge (1.91.4–6).¹⁶ After an initial combat in which Croesus is outnumbered by Cyrus' forces, although both sides suffer, he makes yet another crucial error of judgement in assuming that the battles are over for the winter, which leads to Cyrus' surprise attack and victory, and the end of Croesus' exceptional good fortune.

Chapters 50–2 of Herodotus' first book are evidently much more than a mere list of Croesus' sacrificial offerings. They adroitly represent the excess of his prosperity and his confidence in it, the dangers attendant on being exceptional, and the concomitant need always to consider the end (1.32.9), however hard that is for humans, in Herodotus' worldview.¹⁷

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¹⁴ Of course, he has already experienced suffering of a different kind through having lost his son, but this dreadful event will prove to be just the first stage in his slide from supreme fortune to complete misery.

¹⁵ S. Flory, 'Laughter, Tears and Wisdom In Herodotus', *AJPh* 99 (1978), 145–9, discusses the intimate connection in Herodotus between intense joy and subsequent misery; see also D. Lateiner, *The Historical Method of Herodotus* (Toronto, Buffalo, NY, and London, 1989), 28.

¹⁶ See M. R. Christ, 'Herodotean Kings and Historical Inquiry', *ClAnt* 13 (1994), 189–93, who discusses the Croesus story as an example of the Herodotean motif of testing the divine. Herodotus does not seem to condemn Croesus for his critical attitude to Delphi, but rather for his uncritical acceptance of Delphi's responses once his tests have proved to his satisfaction that the oracle is genuine.

¹⁷ On the centrality of this maxim to the *Histories*, see E. Baragwanath, *Motivation and Narrative in Herodotus* (Oxford, 2008), 2; on the extraordinary difficulty of carrying this principle out, see J. Gould, *Herodotus* (New York, 1989), 79–80.