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# Review of Jessica Priestley, Herodotus & Hellenistic Culture

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## BOOK REVIEW

*Herodotus & Hellenistic Culture: Literary Studies in the Reception of the Histories*. By JESSICA PRIESTLEY. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. Pp. xii + 274. Hardcover, \$99.00. ISBN 978-0-19-965309-6.

For those who approach Hellenistic historiography through Polybius, it perhaps appears that Thucydides was the model and Herodotus was seen as an archaic figure, someone whose practices writers could self-consciously discard or update. Priestley outlines a different reality: Herodotus prefigures many of the cultural preoccupations of the Hellenistic period, he was in fact widely read and imitated, and it was within Hellenistic culture that he arrives at his Ciceronian status as the 'father of history'. Arriving at any definitive conclusions about Hellenistic culture is, of course, a herculean task, given the centrifugal nature of the period and the fragmentary state of the evidence, but Priestley prudently focuses on a few finite approaches that yield persuasive results even if they lack global scope.

Priestley explores five broadly independent approaches to assessing the reception of Herodotus' *Histories* in Hellenistic culture. First she examines the biographical traditions that grew up around Herodotus that are transmitted through the *Suda* and other Byzantine sources. Relying on the premises that the biographical data there are not reliable, but were invented in the Hellenistic period to fill the vacuum of Herodotus' biography, Priestley shows that individual cities counted an association with the *Histories* as a valuable commodity, so they would taut tangential or fictional relationships (e.g. Pella) or invoke bribery to explain Herodotus' unfavorable assessment (e.g. Thebes). This suggests that the *Histories* did continue to have a wide readership in the Hellenistic age, though some examples seem to trade more on the name of Herodotus than on a careful reading of his work.

Second, Priestley examines Hellenistic attitudes toward *thaumata* or 'marvels', which occupy a programmatic place in the *Histories*. Hellenistic historiographers were divided about the appropriateness of *thaumata* in historical writing, but individual discussions continued to look to Herodotus as the model. More broadly Priestley traces a theoretical debate on the intellectual function of wonder, where Herodotus' conception of wonder as an incitement to investigation is dep-

recated by Thucydides and Aristotle, only to be revived by the Hellenistic paradoxographers, especially in the construction of lists of the 'Seven Wonders'. Priestley convincingly reconstructs the debate, though the returns are more suggestive than substantive: the wonders recorded by the paradoxographers often do have a Herodotean flavor once the connection is made, but direct connections remain implicit. Priestley aptly adopts Richard Hunter's term 'soundings' to describe this kind of relationship.

In a third approach, Priestley looks at the reception of Herodotus as an authority for geography in the Hellenistic period. She finds that, despite the fact that geographical knowledge of the *oikoumene* had changed radically with the conquests of Alexander, Hellenistic geographers continued to look to the *Histories* as an authority and felt the need to state their position on Herodotus' comments on topics such as the existence of the Hyperboreans and the source of the Nile. Again, Priestley records a variety of responses, from critical engagement with the text of the *Histories* to more casual references to what had become a common topos.

Priestley then examines the enduring importance of the Persian Wars for Hellenistic culture and how Hellenistic writers' engagements with the invasion of 480 BCE tend to be shaped as responses to Herodotus' account. Thus Timaeus (preserved through Diodorus Siculus) 'corrects' Herodotus' negative portrait of Gelon. Similarly Priestley argues that Apollonius' presentation of Greece as a political unity in the *Argonautica* recalls Herodotus' account, and that his ambiguous presentation of Medea's flight from Colchis engages the different perspectives on the abduction of women in Herodotus' preface. Lycophron's *Alexandra* engages the *Histories* more directly, again focusing on the reciprocal abductions of the preface and Xerxes' invasion. Priestley's broad net here is welcome in extending the realm of reception beyond historiography, though further discussion of the relationship between the *poetae docti* and broader Hellenistic culture would be helpful: should we see these as *recherché* allusions, suggesting Herodotus is a marginal figure for the poets' audiences, or are they engaging an already lively debate?

The final section looks at the development of Herodotus' standing as 'the prose Homer of history' in Hellenistic culture. Priestley takes the phrase from a recently uncovered inscription from Halicarnassus celebrating the city's literary achievements, but shows that it belongs to a broader critical reception of the *Histories* that has its origins in the Hellenistic period. Priestley explores other traces of this critical tradition, including the association of the Muses with the individual books of the *Histories*, characterization of Herodotus' prose as 'poetic', and varying responses to inaccuracies or 'lies' in the *Histories*. This provides a convincing case

that Herodotus continued to be the subject of critical discussion throughout the Hellenistic period.

In conclusion, Priestley has collected evidence for the reception of the *Histories* from a wide range of sources, and presents them with attention to their original contexts and purposes. That Herodotus remained an object of interest to 'professionals' (historians, Alexandrian poets, geographers, etc.) emerges very clearly; that he was standard reading for the majority of literate Greeks or even a school text (191) is perhaps not equally persuasive, though Priestley's suggestion of thematic 'soundings', e.g. that Herodotus' theme resonated with Hellenistic 'east vs. west' thinking, help complete this picture where more concrete evidence is unavailable.

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