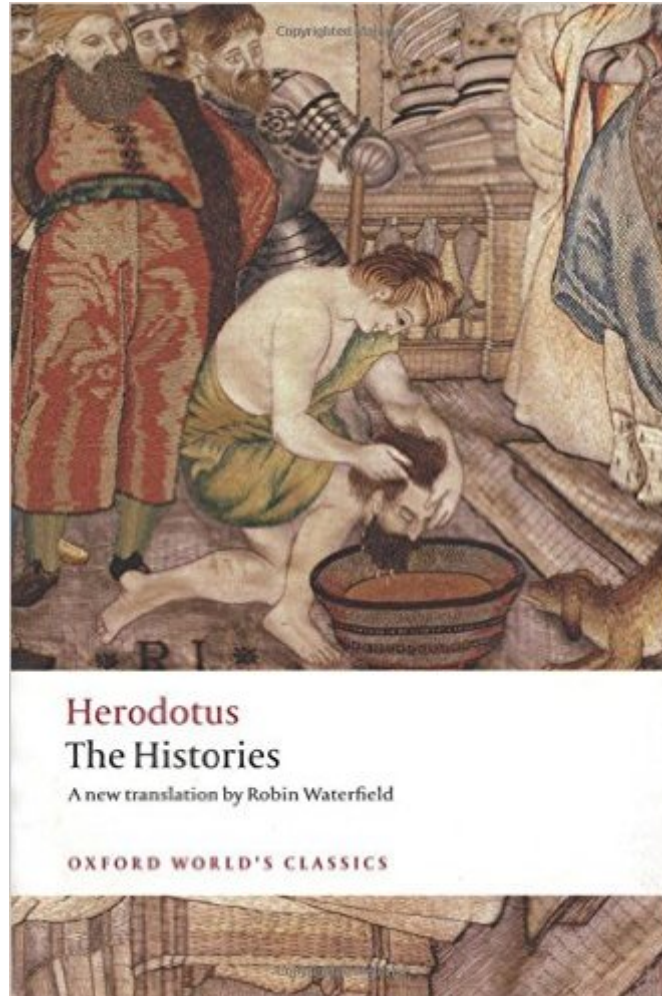


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The Histories (Oxford World's Classics)



Synopsis

"The father of history," as Cicero called him, and a writer possessed of remarkable narrative gifts, enormous scope, and considerable charm, Herodotus has always been beloved by readers well-versed in the classics. Compelled by his desire to "prevent the traces of human events from being erased by time," Herodotus recounts the incidents preceding and following the Persian Wars. He gives us much more than military history, though, providing the fullest portrait of the classical world of the 5th and 6th centuries. Translated by Robin Waterfield, a distinguished translator whose version of Plato's Republic has been described as 'the best available', this readable new translation is supplemented with expansive notes to help the reader appreciate the book in depth. About the Series: For over 100 years Oxford World's Classics has made available the broadest spectrum of literature from around the globe. Each affordable volume reflects Oxford's commitment to scholarship, providing the most accurate text plus a wealth of other valuable features, including expert introductions by leading authorities, voluminous notes to clarify the text, up-to-date bibliographies for further study, and much more.

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Customer Reviews

When students read Herodotus for the first time, they sometimes object that they are not reading real history, only entertaining stories: e.g., the tale of Gyges, a mere bodyguard who, after being forced by King Candaules to peek at his beautiful wife as she is undressing, murders the king, marries his wife and becomes tyrant of Lydia; or wealthy Croesus, King of Lydia, who keeps

pestering the Delphic oracle, finally learning that if he attacks Persia, a Great Empire will fall, a riddle that Croesus does not understand until he has been ensconced on his own funeral pyre by Cyrus, King of Persia; or Cleisthenes, Tyrant of Sicyon, who throws a big engagement party for his daughter, Agariste, only to have one of her suitors, Hippocleides, shock the guests by performing gleeful handstands (in his little short skirt) on a table, when he loses out to Megacles of Athens. Such delightful antics cannot possibly constitute history, which ought to be a strict no-nonsense recitation of 'the facts'. And yet, Herodotus of Halicarnassus both coined the term, 'historia,' and invented the genre. History can therefore be anything that he, the very first historian, pleases. And 'historia,' to Herodotus, meant 'enquiry' or 'investigation.' It is therefore fruitless to lament that Herodotus' account of the Persian Empire and the Greek City-States does not live up to some modern criterion. We are lucky to have this treasure-house of anecdotes. Herodotus, who travelled around the Greek and Persian city states, asked questions and wrote down answers. Thanks to Herodotus, we learn that the Egyptians hunted crocodiles, respected their elders, and ate outdoors [like the Italians].

Dewald's 140-page introduction reflects a thorough awareness of the secondary literature; so, in addition to questions of Herodotus's historical reliability, there are discussions of his "narrative habits" and of the "underlying assumptions and patterns" of the "Histories", religious assumptions, the hardness and softness of peoples, balance, order, and antithesis. Most important of all, this is an introduction that could not only safely but usefully be recommended to students: it is admirably suited for the first-time reader. It opens with the most potted of potted histories of the Persian empire and Persian wars, 5th-century intellectual developments, the Athenian democracy, and the Athenian empire (pp. ix-x). There follows a synopsis of the plot of the "Histories" (pp. xiii-vi); the notes also include lengthy introductions to the structure of each book. Students' difficulties with Herodotus focus on precisely these questions of structure: "there is no sense of direction", it is often said; "he just goes off on a tangent". The underlying patterns -- e.g., Herodotus's echoes of his opening at the end of the "Histories" (p. xli) -- need to be pointed out. Despite very occasional descents into classicist jargon, Dewald's discussion of Herodotus's "narrative habits" (pp. xvi-xxvii) and her book-by-book descriptions in the notes highlight what one might call the submerged structure of the "Histories" splendidly. Her introduction should sufficiently inoculate against pained first reactions. As for Waterfield's translation, it is accurate to Herodotus but often lacking flair and grandeur. And I find Waterfield's frequent usage of the phrase "non-Greeks" most irritating.

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