

ORAL TRADITION IN HERODOTUS

by J.A.S. Evans

Hérodote fut souvent appelé "le père de l'histoire" et les historiens de l'histoire orale ont souvent fait appel à sa mémoire et à sa démarche pour justifier la légitimité des études qu'ils entreprenaient en histoire par le biais de l'histoire orale. Mais qui était véritablement Hérodote, le père de "l'histoire orale"? Jusqu'à quel point son histoire reflète-t-elle la vérité? Pour répondre à ces questions, le professeur Evans compare la méthode utilisée en histoire orale en Afrique et dans le Grèce ancienne. Il en arrive à la conclusion que tout comme dans l'Afrique précoloniale, il existait des gens spécialisés dans le fait de rappeler le passé. Ces conteurs difficilement identifiables au temps d'Hérodote étaient cependant les seuls semble-t-il à pouvoir fournir une version officielle des événements passés. C'est la raison pour laquelle la méthode de quête d'informations d'Hérodote auprès de ces informateurs doit être envisagée avec prudence d'autant plus que ces informations servaient plus souvent qu'autrement à rehausser le prestige d'un état ou d'une dynastie. Notons toutefois que si les sources d'Hérodote n'en demeurent pas moins plausibles aux yeux de ses contemporains, sa méthode quant à elle reste douteuse.

Let us start with an old chestnut, familiar to most students of ancient historiography. The Greek historian, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, who lived in the society that produced the Roman Emperor Augustus, and thus occupied a pinnacle of sophistication of sorts, wrote an essay on Thucydides addressed to one Quintus Aelius Tubero, who was an amateur historian himself and a Thucydidean imitator. Tubero's works are lost in oblivion, but Dionysius' little essay has survived to intrigue the students of the ancient world. In the following passage, he is concerned to show how history developed from dim beginnings, through Herodotus, the "Father of History", to Thucydides. The half-chapter in question has been much quoted, but it will bear repetition:

"Before beginning to write about Thucydides, I would like to say a few words about the other historians, both the more ancient ones and those who flourished in his period. These few words will illuminate his choice of subject, in which he went beyond his predecessors, and his ability to deal with it. Now, the ancient historians flourished in great numbers and in various places before the Peloponnesian War, including Euaqon of Samos, Deiochus of Cyzicus, Bion of Proconnesus, Eudemos of

Paros, Democles of Phygela, Hecataeus of Miletus, Acusilaos of Argos, Charon of Lampsacus, and Amelesagoras of Chalcedon. Those who were a little before the Peloponnesian War and extended down to the time of Thucydides were Hellanicus of Lesbos, Damastes of Sigeum, Xenomedes of Ceos, Xanthus of Lydia and many others. All of these showed a like bent in the choice of their subjects, and there was little difference in their ability. Some wrote treatises dealing with Greek history; the others dealt with non-Greek history. And they did not blend together these histories into one work, but subdivided them by nations and cities, and gave a separate account of each, keeping in view one single and unvarying object, that of bringing to the common knowledge of all, records or traditions that were to be found among the natives of individual nationalities or states, whether recorded in places sacred or profane, and to deliver these just as they received them, without adding thereto or subtracting therefrom, rejecting not even legends which had been believed for many generations, nor dramatic tales which seem to me of the present time to have a large measure of silliness."¹

We are on well-worn ground here. To us, Herodotus emerges as the first historian of the Western world, and indeed by the time of Cicero, he was the "Father of History", though not always a reliable one.² What Dionysius indicates is that before Herodotus, there were a large number of historians at work, putting down traditions, some of which were oral, and others ultimately based upon oral transmission, though they may have been in writing by the fifth century B.C. But it is likely that a good many of the historians named by Dionysius were too late to be used extensively by Herodotus; his contemporaries in the field they may have been, but they were not sturdy pioneers on whose shoulders Herodotus stood. Their methods, as described by Dionysius, sound like that which Herodotus claimed as his own. He, too, put down records as he received them, even though he might not believe them. Throughout, the verb that he uses constantly of his sources and of his own account as well, is legein (to say), not graphein (to write); when he does use graphein upon occasion, there is usually a special reason for it. His sources "spoke"; they were not there to read. As Henry Immerwahr pointed out perceptively in his Form and Thought in Herodotus³, Herodotus maintains throughout the persona of an oral historian working with oral sources.

This investigation into methods by which oral tradition is transmitted and the light it throws upon Herodotus' historical sources began with some thoughts about the fall of Croesus, king of Lydia, who lost his kingdom to the founder of the Persian Empire, Cyrus, late in 547 B.C. or early the next year. Croesus was the individual with whom Herodotus began his history. The History starts with a kind of imaginary debate between Persian memorialists on one side, and their Greek counterparts on the other, and the subject was who began the strife between Europe and Asia. These gentlemen are called logioi: men who were learned in legends and history. Herodotus (2.77) applies the term in its superlative form at one point to men who cultivated their memories. Their stock-in-trade was prose, not poetry, which was the province of the epic poet. So "memorialists" will do as a translation. These memorialists, Greek and Persian, attempted to find the cause for the strife between East and West which was well-established by Herodotus' day, and their method was to search for the earliest hostile act, and to assign the blame to whichever side was responsible for it. Their arguments took them into the mythical past, well before the Trojan War, and the results, as one might expect, were somewhat inconclusive, for ancient myths they used as bases for their arguments existed in more than one version, and they resisted scientific method. Herodotus ended the debate abruptly. He would not go on talking about these stories; he knew the man who first did wrong to the Greeks, and he would name him, and proceed forthwith with his history. That man was Croesus, the son of

Alyattes, and he was tyrant of the nations west of the Halys River in Asia Minor.

A great many students have felt in their bones that something significant for the development of historiography has taken place here. Schadewaldt⁴ argued in 1934 that Herodotus was distinguishing sharply between myth and history; the tales that the memorialists who belonged to oral tradition, purveyed, belonged to the first category, and Croesus to the second. However, as we read on, we find that Herodotus does not hesitate to mingle history with what we would denominate myth; he seems not to have recognized any sharp distinction between the two. For that matter, the story of Croesus itself qualifies very well as a myth which seems to modern eyes (to quote Dionysius) to have "a large measure of silliness".

So we must avoid distinctions that are clear and precise to the modern mind, but anachronistic in the context of the mid-fifth century B.C. Therefore a search has been undertaken for analogies elsewhere. The search has led into the work done on oral history by Africanists, who have been able to investigate societies where the apparatus for the transmission of oral history is still in operation, or was until a few years ago. It has also led into some detours into the structuralist analysis of myth, for myth and oral tradition are allied, and it would be a mistake to think that oral history is transmitted simply for love of historical accuracy. The aim of all this is to elucidate a common Herodotean citation: again and again, Herodotus prefaces a story with something like, "the Carians say", or "the Greeks say", or "the people living around Thermopylae say", or the like. Four times only, he mentions specific informants who gave him information on certain points, but this only deepens the mystery. Why should Herodotus give "credit lines" to these four who gave him minor points with which to flesh out his stories, while a great body of tradition is attributed merely to groups designated as "the Spartans", "the Carians" or the like, with the implication that the group named had preserved the tradition attributed to it, and agreed it was true?

Let us take an example. Herodotus (4. 145-148) relates a long tale of how the colony of Cyrene was founded in Libya, which he bases on three traditions identified as Spartan, Theraean, and Cyrenaic. The first told how Minyans, driven from Lemnos, came as refugees to Sparta and were at first accepted; then they grew arrogant and the Spartans were about to slay them when Theras, who was leading a colony from Sparta to settle on Thera, the southernmost island of the Cyclades, asked if he might take the Minyans with him. Once the colony was founded, Spartan traditions about it ceased, and Herodotus notes that his next chapter, telling how Thera in turn founded Cyrene, rested on Theraean tradition although it crossed paths at one point with a story from Samos. However, very soon Herodotus informs his readers that he was now basing his tale upon tradition from Cyrene that tallied well with Theraean tradition except where it touched on the oikist and first king of Cyrene, Battus. The three traditions of Sparta, Thera and Cyrene are cited as if they were quasi-official in their states, but Herodotus identifies no specific informants though he does hint that the great Spartan clan of the Aegidae, that claimed Theras' grandson as its progenitor and had members resident at Thera as well as Sparta, may have preserved some useful family memories.

What are we to make of this? Could the Spartans, the Theraeans and the Cyrenaicans have given Herodotus, as he seems to imply, oral accounts of Cyrene's foundation that were accepted as official in their several states? Or does he really have a written source which he will not admit to, as many quellenforschers have argued? Or are the rubrics, "the Spartans say" and other expressions of this ilk, simply literary topoi intended to give bogus authenticity to tales that Herodotus picked up elsewhere? In this instance, the mystery deepens because an inscription was

found at Cyrene in 1928 that purports to give the original decree passed by the assembly of Thera that ordered the dispatch of the colonists to Cyrene. The inscription dates to the fourth century B.C., and the decree it reproduces belongs to the seventh; how was it preserved for the intervening 300 years? There is a certain smoothing of detail that leads one to suspect that it did not spend all those years in written form. The latest editors suggest that it is the result of "a long and complex moulding of a genuine original within the tradition of Thera. We would not care to make precise the elements of oral and written transmission in this tradition..."⁵

For the sake of argument, let us take Herodotus at his word. He claimed he was using oral traditions and since he gave public readings of his History before it was published, he was in some sense still fifty per cent oral historian himself. What was the sort of world within which a Greek oral historian might operate? Here we must look elsewhere for analogies, and the research done into African oral history is of particular interest.

There are two aspects of African oral history that must interest the student of Herodotus. One is its chronological method; the other its manner of transmission, and the ways in which testimonies can be distorted. Chronology first. In pre-colonial Africa south of the Sahara, the sources of oral history were generally professional story-tellers and official keepers of state traditions, and usually they have at best a hazy idea of absolute chronology.⁶ But in practically every state ruled by kings or chiefs, the custodians of tradition had lists of rulers in what purports to be chronological order, and when these states came into contact with writing, such lists were often the first morsels of history to be written down. The kings are usually shown as ruling consecutively, even when their reigns overlap: the practice is familiar to the ancient historian from the Sumerian king lists, and also from the list of pharaonic dynasties drawn up by the Egyptian priest Manetho that serves as a framework for the history of ancient Egypt. There is also a nice example in the inscription set up at Behistun by Darius the Great of Persia: there Darius names nine ancestors of the Achaemenid House ruling before him, without indicating that they ruled in part, in parallel lines.⁷ On the other hand, some regnal lists can assign a very accurate sum of years to a reign's duration;⁸ statistics of that sort might be kept with great care, sometimes by means of mnemonic devices. In one kingdom the length of each reign was measured, according to a report that has not been unchallenged, by putting a nugget for every year into a brass container and then preserving these containers in a sacred place, the "Chapel of the Stools", in the state capital.⁹ There is a notable parallel from the ancient world: in Rome, the pontifex maximus who had inherited the sacerdotal powers of the kings, including the right to regulate the calendar, took a nail each year and drove it into the wall of the temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus on the Capitoline Hill, a simple, primitive way of keeping track of the number of years that had passed since the foundation of the city. It follows that when we find a reign measured precisely in years in oral tradition, we should not be unduly skeptical, for the tradition may go back to some method of time-reckoning. To take an example from Herodotus:¹⁰ he tells us that the Pisistratid dynasty, father and son, ruled Athens as tyrants for 36 years. The last Pisistratid tyrant fell in 511/10 B.C., and thus the reign of the family began in 547/6 B.C. Now, when King Croesus of Lydia was on the eve of his ill-fated war with Persia, he sent to Athens to ask for help, and his envoys found the tyranny just nicely established. That fact should fix the date for Croesus' fall. Regrettably the matter is not that simple, for Herodotus seems to have thought that Croesus fell almost a decade earlier; the reason was, perhaps, that he was working not only with an oral chronological tradition from Athens, but also a king-list from Persia which may have been ultimately based on oral tradition too, and it was the latter tradition

that misled him. Yet we should cling to the 36 years of Pisistratid tyranny for this is the sort of statistic that oral tradition would preserve, and it is probably accurate.

However, royal genealogies from Africa were often mere lists of names and hence Africanists are concerned to establish average lengths of generations in order to secure a chronological framework. For the sub-Sahara kingdoms, an average generation length, worked out from 311 examples, comes to 30.3 years. This is close to the 30.5 years which is the average in England between 1066 and 1951, and not much different from the rule-of-thumb that Herodotus¹¹ gives, of three generations to a century. But when we try to work the other way and use the average generation to assign calendar years to events, the concept can be full of shortcomings. One scholar who made the experiment of using the average generation to assign dates to events in English history found that for the seventeenth century, he could be as much as fifty years out.¹² Genealogies give a sense of time, or perhaps even an area of time, but little more.

They were, however, kept with some care. Oral traditions generally fell into two categories, official and private. The first represents the officially recognized truth about the past, and it is common to find designated officials responsible for this type of tradition.¹³ In Rwanda, a monarchy until 1961, there were genealogists, memorialists, Rhapsodists, and a group called the abiiru, each responsible for keeping one category of tradition. The genealogists remembered the lists of the kings and the queen mothers, the memorialists the most important events of each reign, the rhapsodists preserved the panegyrics on the kings, and the abiiru kept the secrets of the dynasty. It was these guardians of official tradition who controlled it, not the kings. None the less, official traditions are particularly prone to distortion and the motive is often the desire to give greater prestige to the state, or to the dynasty. Royal genealogies are official, almost by definition, and they bestow prestige upon the reigning monarch by emphasizing his legitimacy.

The Spartan king-lists in Herodotus are a good example of this sort of thing. Sparta was a dyarchy with two kings and two royal families, each tracing its descent back to Heracles, which gave legitimacy not merely to the kings, but to Spartan hegemony in the Peloponnesos. Herodotus tells a tale of how Cleomenes I of Sparta took Athens and was about to enter the temple of Athena on the acropolis when the priestess warned him that it was unlawful for a Dorian to pass over the goddess' threshold. "I am no Dorian, but an Achaeon", replied Cleomenes, thereby invoking the official traditions of his house that took it back to the Achaeon Heracles, and the princes of the Mycenaean world, whose claims the priestess would be hard put to deny.

At the same time, this descent from Heracles posed a chronological problem, for the Greeks dated Heracles before the Trojan War, and the Spartan royal pedigrees will stretch that far only if the generations have an average length of forty years.¹⁴ History knows few dynasties with forty-year generations; most of those that have existed are to be found in late medieval and early modern Germany, and most, for biological reasons, become extinct fairly early.¹⁵ It is unlikely that both Spartan royal houses could have survived from before the Trojan War with generations that averaged forty years. The chronology has been stretched, and the reason was the need for prestige and legitimacy.

Private traditions are those transmitted by individual groups, such as families, without official sanction. Clan histories fall somewhere between the two categories: they are "official" as far as they refer to the clan, but private so far as they refer

to history outside. Private traditions generally do not go back as far in time as their official counterparts, for memories fade after three generations, and genealogies can suffer from a process known as "structural amnesia" whereby a list of ancestors may have no more names in it than it did a century ago. The less important names fall out because of a subconscious desire for efficiency. There is also the tendency of family tradition to remember the great deeds of its members and forget their less honorable ones, but for all that, private traditions are less prone to distortion than their official counterparts, for they are less likely to be called upon to serve a social function. Yet, there is always some ulterior motive for remembering. Researchers have yet to find an oral tradition that has been transmitted purely for love of knowledge.

It follows that the extent to which an official tradition can impose itself on the history of a state depends in great part on that state's social and political organization. Monarchies and chiefdoms propagate official traditions. So could towns: in Nigeria, the Yoruba town of Ketu had an hereditary official known as the baba elegum who knew the town's history by heart, and those who have read Alex Haley's Roots will be familiar with his description of the village griot in the Republic of the Gambia.¹⁶ There are exceptions: in Burundi, which was a monarchy until 1966, there was apparently no official tradition but history was told in songs, tales and proverbs. But in general, official traditions would probably face greater competition in an open society such as that of Athens, than in a closed society such as Sparta's. But everywhere there were specialists who sought to transmit tradition correctly from generation to generation, and the specialist who erred was subject to varying sanctions, ranging from ridicule to death. Such specialists have been found not only in Africa, but also Polynesia, and among the Incas and Aztecs in America. Can we find counterparts in ancient Greece? Were the Greek and Persian logioi whose imaginary debate opens the History specialists of this sort? There is no doubt that there were oral poets in archaic Greece: the Chiot clan of the Homeridai who claimed descent from Homer, were a group of specialists in epic poetry analogous to the rhapsodes in Rwanda. But were there professional memorialists charged with keeping official tradition in archaic Greece, and could Herodotus have talked with them, and learned from them official traditions that he reports with rubrics such as "the Spartans say", "the men of Thera say", and so on?

When Aristotle in his Politics¹⁷ names the officials necessary for a city, he mentions various registrars called hieromnemones, epistatai, and mnemones: "sacred remembrancers", "keepers of archives", and "remembrancers". In the passage of Dionysius already quoted, he mentions local traditions "recorded in places sacred and profane", which must surely be the traditions preserved by Aristotle's officials. Finally, a few years ago, an interesting archaic inscription turned up on Crete, inscribed on a bronze mitra of abdominal guard. It sets forth the rights and privileges of one Spensithios, who is to be poinikastes and mnemon of a city, and his descendants after him. He combines two offices in his person: the second, that of mnemon, is "remembrancer". He was to remember what the city needed to remember, and his descendants after him. "The office of mnemon (remembrancer, recorder) may have existed here already, as elsewhere in Crete", remark Lilian Jeffery and Anna Morpurgo-Davies in their initial publication of this inscription,¹⁸ "but a mnemon need not be literate; his memory is essential".

The first office, that of poinikastes, gives some trouble, for the word appears here for the first time. It probably means, in Cretan dialect, "a specialist in Phoenician letters". Greece borrowed its alphabet from Phoenicia, and she remembered the loan: the term "Phoenician letters" occurs in Herodotus (5. 53). So Spensithios was literate. The inscription dates from about 500 B.C. at a time when literacy was becoming more common, and the hereditary "remembrancer" Spensithios adapted himself to the times. The rights and privileges of a professional "remembrancer" that were

once protected by custom, he had set down in writing, and inscribed on a piece of his armour that he wore suspended from his belt. Moreover, he no longer relied completely on his memory, as no doubt his father and grandfather had done. He had mastered the new technology. He could write. But if we may draw an analogy from the African kingdoms, oral traditions and written traditions probably co-existed for a long time and the old guardians of oral traditions did not give way to the new literacy without reluctance.

Dionysius of Halicarnassus attempted to show that historical method in ancient Greece had progressed from such early practitioners as Euagon of Samos and Bion of Proconnesus, to Herodotus, and Thucydides. Whether or not he was right can still provoke argument, but some, at least, of the predecessors whom Dionysius names were Herodotus' contemporaries, and what appears to be the case is that Herodotus lived at the time of intense historical activity. Not merely Herodotus, but a host of shadowy researchers were at work putting down records, motivated by a desire to preserve correct traditions at a time when literacy was becoming widespread, and stories once preserved in the heads of professional remembrancers were being put into writing. We have the titles of some of these "works", such as the list of the Priestesses of the Hera temple at Argos, the Olympic Victor List, the Victors at the Carneian festival in Sparta, giving the names of victors at the Olympic Games from 776 B.C., and so on. Dull stuff, but somebody must have remembered it until it could be committed to writing. Behind all this activity lay the effects of the social changes in Greece in the later sixth and fifth centuries B.C. Outbreaks of genealogical fever, J.H. Plumb noted in his The Death of the Past,¹⁹ occur when new classes are emerging in a state, when the old elites feel threatened, or when they fall under foreign domination. But the stories of oral tradition--myths in the Greek sense of the word--resisted scientific method. Thucydides, rigorous as he was, could use Homer as a source, but the problem for him, writing a generation after Herodotus, was how to find a correct account of an event once all the witnesses were dead and could not give testimony. Herodotus had relied upon oral traditions to recreate the past, and when he found conflicting evidence he gave variant versions. That would not do for Thucydides. He aimed at historical truth, and after him, it becomes a cliché among the Greco-Roman historians that what they purvey is "the truth". The "truth" was something to be ascertained by witnesses (unfortunately, democracy had taught the Athenians court procedure) and since oral history could not produce them, it had to be abandoned. Thucydides concluded that the distant past could not be recovered with scientific accuracy, and after him, the ancient historians preferred to deal with the contemporary world.

We are left with an hypothesis. It is that archaic, preliterate Greece did have professionals analogous to those found in precolonial Africa, whose role it was to remember the past. With the coming of the alphabet, and the growth of literacy, the role of the remembrancer changed, but they were still to be found in Herodotus' day, and they were ready and willing to provide "official" accounts of events. Thus, when Herodotus related the story of how the colony of Cyrene was founded, he could give a Spartan, a Theraean and a Cyrenaic version, which did not agree on every point, and these were the accounts preserved by remembrancers of the three states. In addition, he found some private sources, such as the four informants he mentions specifically, and we must not forget family traditions, for the view that Herodotus was dependent on the Alkmaeonid clan, and its head, Pericles, for much of his Athenian history, is so well-established that it must be given its due. Moreover, Herodotus was not alone in his research. He lived at a time when literacy was becoming relatively widespread and records were being put into writing. In Athens itself, sometime about 425 B.C., a list of the archons for each year was inscribed on stone and set up in the marketplace;²⁰ before that time, there is no solid evidence that the list had been committed to writing.

By the fourth century B.C. the situation had changed. In 403/2 B.C. Athens organized her archives in the Metroon, the temple of the Mother of the Gods. Thucydides wrote his history, with its implied strictures on Herodotus' type of history which had been "published" by public readings before it reached its final form. Thucydides belongs to the new world of writing; he was producing a "possession for all time" written in difficult prose that was meant to be studied, and Herodotus went on to acquire the reputation that clung to him until a generation ago. He made pleasant reading, but he was gullible and simply not reliable.

NOTES

1. On Thucydides, 5. (trans. W.K. Pritchett, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, On Thucydides, Berkeley, 1975, p.3).
2. See J.A.S. Evans, "Father of History or Father of Lies: The Reputation of Herodotus", Classical Journal, 64(1968) pp.11-17.
3. Cleveland, O., 1966, pp.6-7.
4. W. Schadewaldt, "Die Anfänge des Geschichtsschreibens bei den Griechen", Die Antike, 10(1943) pp.144-168; cf. F. Hampl, Gräzer Beiträge, 4(1975) pp.97-136.
5. Russell Meiggs and David Lewis, A Selection of Greek Historical Inscriptions to the End of the Fifth Century B.C. (Oxford, 1969) pp.5-9.
6. D.H. Jones, "Problems of African Chronology", Journal of African History, 11.2(1970) pp.161-176.
7. David P. Henige, The Chronology of the Oral Tradition (Oxford, 1974) pp.42-46.
8. Jones, op.cit., pp.162-163.
9. E.L.R. Meyerowitz, Akan Traditions of Origin (London, 1962) pp.29-33; cf. Jones, op.cit., pp.162-163; Jan Vansina, Oral Tradition (Chicago, 1965) pp.15-17.
10. Hdt. 5. 65; cf. J.A.S. Evans, "What Happened to Croesus?", Classical Journal, 74(1978) pp.34-40.
11. Hdt. 2. 142.
12. Jones, op.cit., p.168.
13. Vansina, op.cit., pp.39-49.
14. Cf. H.T. Wade-Gery, The Poet of the Iliad (Cambridge, 1952) pp.27-29.
15. Henige, op.cit., pp.123-124.
16. Notes and queries on Anthropology (Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, London), 1951, p.204; Alex Haley, Roots (Dell Books, New York, 1977) pp.716-720; cf. Paul Thompson, The Voice of the Past, Oral History (Oxford, 1978) pp.19-24.

17. 1321 b 39.
18. Kadmos, 9. 1 (1970) pp.118-154.
19. Boston, Mass., 1971, pp.31-32.
20. Meiggs-Lewis (note 5), pp.9-12. This paper, in altered form, was given orally at a joint session of the Classical Association of Canada and the Canadian Historical Society in London, Ontario, in June of 1978. Thanks are due to Professor Ernst Badian of Harvard University for some good advice.