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The preface to *Herodotus'* Histories,
as evidence for the importance of the sea

In my paper I will present a rhetorical analysis of the preface to Herodotus' *Histories*¹.

But first, I have to define the preface, or prologue, of this work, because scholars disagree on the composition of the preface, a disagreement which in turn affects our understanding of Herodotus's methodology. For example, there are scholars who regard the opening sentence as the preface², while others think that the opening sentence plus the first five chapters form the preface³. Still others hold the opinion that, in the strict sense, the preface comprises only the opening sentence; and, in a wider sense, it includes also chapters 1-5⁴. My position is that the opening sentence and the first five chapters must be regarded as the prologue.

The prologue has been written with "preconceived formal concepts"⁵. Herodotus took these preconceived formal concepts from rhetoric. «Both Greek rhetorical theory and self-conscious techniques of oratory seem to be a product of democracy as it developed in Athens after the Persian Wars, especially after the reforms of Ephialtes (462 BCE), and in Syracuse when democracy replaced tyranny (467 BCE)», writes G.A. Kennedy⁶. In his treatise *On Sophistical Refutations* Aristotle begins with Tisias a brief survey of the development of rhetoric: «Tisias following the first inventors, Thrasymachus following Tisias, Theodorus following Thrasymachus» (183b, 31)⁷. The handbooks of Tisias and Theodorus «were arranged by the parts of an oration, giving advice as to what should be

¹ See Corbett 1969, xi - xxviii.

² How - Wells 1991, 53; Brusa Zappellini 1990, 76-78.

³ Legrand 1995, 9-11; Darbo-Peschanski 1987, 23-24; Węcowski 2004, 146-155.

⁴ Asheri 1988, 261; Asheri, *et al.* 2007, 72.

⁵ I do not agree with Asheri *et al.* 2007, 8: «Herodotus' proem seems to have been written straight off, freely and without preconceived formal concepts».

⁶ Kennedy 1989, 86.

⁷ Forster 1992, 153.

treated in each part»⁸. From Plato's *Phaedrus* it is clear that these authors deal with the prologue: «Socrates – You mean that there must be an introduction first, at the beginning of the discourse; (...) And the narrative must come second with the testimony after it, and third the proofs”» (266d-e)⁹.

As I have stated above, the opening sentence and the first five chapters of the first book of Herodotus' *Histories* form together the prologue.

In the opinion of Legrand, the preface consists of two parts. The first part is the opening sentence which gives the title and alludes to the subject and the general aim of the work: «D'abord un intitulé, où Hérodote se présente aux lecteurs, leur présente son oeuvre, et indique – approximativement – le programme de cette oeuvre»¹⁰. This sentence reads in Godley's English translation as follows: «What Herodotus the Halicarnassian has learnt by inquiry is here set forth: in order that so the memory of the past may not be blotted out from among men by time (τὰ γενόμενα ἐξ ἀνθρώπων) and that great and marvellous deeds (ἔργα μεγάλα τε καὶ θωμαστά) done by Greeks and foreigners and especially the reason (τά τε ἄλλα καὶ δι' ἣν αἰτίην) why they warred against each other may not lack renown» (Hdt. I 1, 1).¹¹

The second part of the proem deals with the Persian and Phoenician accounts of the origin of the conflict between Greeks and foreigners – according to Legrand: «La seconde partie du préambule fixe [...] le point de départ de l'histoire des conflits telle que l'auteur a l'intention de l'exposer, et résume brièvement les étapes précédentes. [...] Hérodote prétend les rapporter d'après “les Perses” et “les Phéniciens”. Et je ne vois pas de raison convaincante pour mettre en doute sa parole»¹².

I would like to make two remarks on Legrand's opinion. 1. He correctly stresses that “τὰ γενόμενα ἐξ ἀνθρώπων” are the usual historical events, [...] “ἔργα μεγάλα τε καὶ θωμαστά” are the heroic deeds of great men.¹³ As for the formula “τά τε ἄλλα καὶ”, Herodotus reminds the readers that they will find a little bit of everything in his work¹⁴. 2. The Homeric proems, too, give the reason of the conflicts of their heroes; the same happens in the second part of Herodotus' preface.

⁸ Kennedy 1994, 33.

⁹ North Fowler 1960, 537.

¹⁰ Legrand 1995, 9.

¹¹ Godley 2001, 3. For discussion of the opening sentence see Asheri *et al.* 2007, 72-73; Nagy 1987, 175-184.

¹² Legrand 1995, 10.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁴ Id. 1966, 231: «Hérodote lui-même, par la τὰ τε ἄλλα καὶ, prévenait les lecteurs qu'ils trouveraient chez lui “un peu de tout”».

Marek Węcowski, too, argues that the “extended preface” is a carefully organized large-scale “pediment composition”¹⁵. This means, that the five introductory chapters of the *Histories* show «a large-scale ring-composition with a subtle net of correspondence»¹⁶. It is this larger division that he considers «to be the prologue of Herodotus' work». The main results of his examination of this structure are as follows:

1. «the stories about the abductions of women form an ironic attack against a peculiar model of causality of some contemporary Greek poets and writers, whose pragmatic outlook deprives the world of its ethico-religious dimension».

2. «Conversely, Herodotus himself propounds a symbolic view of the world and sees a monistic principle encompassing the past and the whole range of human experience».

3. «Although he belongs to the agonistic and display-oriented intellectual world of the sophistic era, Herodotus poses as a “sage” capable of penetrating the whole variety of “all things”»¹⁷.

In Węcowski's opinion the prologue presents the subject and the principles of Herodotus' work to the public. Furthermore, he stresses that the *Histories* has an ethico-religious dimension, that is, a symbolic view of the world, with a controversial character.

At the time when Herodotus worked on his *Histories*, rhetoric had already elaborated the principles of the genre of introduction. We find a fixed system of introduction in both the *De Rhetorica ad Alexandrum* and the *Rhetorica of Aristotle*.

The author of the *De Rhetorica ad Alexandrum* writes about introduction as follows: «The Proem can be described in a general way as a preparation of one's audience and a declaration of the subject in a summary manner for the benefit of the ignorant, in order that they may know with what the speech is concerned and may follow the argument. It also exhorts them to pay attention, and tries, as far as is possible in a speech, to influence their minds in our favour. Such is the preparation at which the proem must aim» (29)¹⁸.

Aristotle formulates essentially the same doctrine in his *Rhetorica*: «The Introduction is the beginning of a speech, corresponding to the prologue in poetry and the prelude in flute music; they are all beginnings, paving the way, as it were, for what is follow. [...] In prologues, and in epic poetry, a foretaste of the theme is given, intended to inform the hearers of it in advance instead of keeping their minds in suspense. [...] The other kinds of introduction employed are remedial in purpose, and may be used in any type of speech. They are concerned with the

¹⁵ Węcowski 2004, 143.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 147.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 143.

¹⁸ Forster 1971, 1436a.

speaker, the hearer, the subject, or the speaker's opponent. Those concerned with the speaker himself or with his opponent are directed to removing or exciting prejudice. [...] The appeal to the hearer aims at securing his goodwill, or at arousing his resentment, or sometimes at gaining his serious attention to the case, or even at distracting it» (III 14)¹⁹.

Herodotus elaborated the prologue of his work under the influence of the rhetorical introduction. The first thing that Herodotus stresses in his prologue is the agonistic or controversial nature of his work. The second part of the prologue deals with the Persian (§§1-4), Phoenician, and Herodotean (§5) discussion of mythical origins of the conflict between Asia and Europe²⁰. David Asheri is right when he emphasizes: «Herodotus was interested in the problem of who was the “first responsible”, or the culprit, for the conflict between Asia and Europe, just as he was interested in the “first inventors” of all things. He wants to know for what reason and in what ways one is driven to act, what desires and considerations precede decisions»²¹.

The Persian learned men say that the Phoenicians were the cause of the conflict because they came to the Greek seas from the Red Sea, and having settled there began to make long voyages. They then came to Argos, and set out their cargo. There came to the sea shore among many other women the king's daughter, whose name was Io. While they bargained for the wares on the stern of the ship, the Phoenicians rushed to take them. «Io with others was carried off; the men cast her into the ship and made sail away for Egypt (ἐσβαλομένους δὲ ἐς τὴν νέα οἴχεσθαι ἀποπλέοντας ἐπ' Αἰγύπτου)» (§1).²²

But the Phoenicians say that they did not carry Io off to Egypt by force: «she had intercourse in Argos with the captain of the ship; then, perceiving herself to be with child, she was ashamed that her parents should know it, and so, lest they should discover her condition, she sailed away with the Phoenicians of her own accord (ἐθέλοντὴν αὐτὴν τοῖσι Φοίνιξι συνεκπλῶσαι)» (§5).²³

After having expounded the opinions of the Persians and the Phoenicians, Herodotus makes known his own judgement: «For my own part, I will not say that this or that story is true, but I will name him whom I myself know to have

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 1414b-1415a.

²⁰ See Beltrametti 1986, 18: «Per contro, nelle *Storie* incominciava a trasparirmi un'altra ambiguità. Le polemiche esplicite di passi come I 1-5, III 122, VI 53 – per far solo alcuni esempi – sembravano voler interrompere qualunque forma di continuità tra questa scrittura storica e altre ricostruzioni del passato più vicine al mito e comunque risalenti nel tempo oltre la generazione degli uomini, oltre Perseo, all'impero di Minosse, ai rapimenti di Io, Europa, Medea ed Elena».

²¹ Asheri *et al.* 2007, 40.

²² Godley 2001, I, 5; see Vignolo Munson 2009, 457–470.

²³ Godley 2001, I, 7.

done unprovoked wrong to the Greeks (πρῶτον ὑπάρξαντα ἀδίκων ἔργων ἐς τοὺς Ἕλληνας), and so go forward with my history, and speak of small and great cities alike» (§5)²⁴.

It is worth remarking that Herodotus does not say that the Persians or the Phoenicians are wrong. He only expounds his own opinion, and leaves it to the readers to decide who is right. According to Aristotle it is the best method of teaching: to show the opposites²⁵.

In the original version, Zeus as a womanizer impregnates Io²⁶, and the jealous Hera turns her into a white cow, fleeing a gadfly, who finally arrives in Egypt²⁷. Herodotus rationalizes this original myth of Io, and in his rationalized story, the sea and the ships play an important part²⁸.

So the first wrong was done by the Phoenicians who abducted Io by ship, and sailed away for Egypt. «Next, according to their tale, certain Greeks (Ἑλλήνων τινάς) (they cannot tell who) landed at Tyre in Phoenice and carried off the king's daughter Europa. These Greeks must, I suppose, have been Cretans. So far, then, the account between them stood balanced» (§2)²⁹. According to the original Cretan myth «Europa arrived at Crete riding the back of a bull-shaped Zeus»³⁰. Herodotus rationalized this myth, too, and it is clear from the situation, that the abduction of Europa happened on a ship at sea.

The series of abductions continues: «But after this (say they) it was the Greeks who were guilty of the second wrong. They sailed in a long ship to Aea of the Colchians and the river Phasis: and when they had done the rest of the business for which they came, they carried off the king's daughter Medea» (§2)³¹. Herodotus refers here to the Argonaut expedition to Colchis; the μακρὴ νηΐς is the legendary Argo, a fifty-oared ship. In the traditional version Medea willingly leaves her country with the Argonauts because she fell in love with Jason³².

«Then (so the story runs) in the second generation after this Alexandrus son of Priam, having heard this tale, was minded to win himself a wife out of Hellas by ravishment (δὲ ἄρπαγῆς); for he was well persuaded that, as the Greeks had

²⁴ Godley 2001, I, 9.

²⁵ See Aristot. *Rhet.* III 9 (1410a); III 10 (1410b); III 11 (1412b).

²⁶ Kirk 1973, 180, 184.

²⁷ Asheri et al. 2007, 76; see also Gantz 2004, 351-362.

²⁸ For occurrence of the sea and the ship see Enoch Powell 1960, 164-165, 232; for function of myth in Greek historiography see Biraschi 1989, 11-21.

²⁹ Godley 2001, I, 5.

³⁰ Asheri et al. 2007, 76; see also Baconicola-Ghéorgopoulou 1997, 45-54.

³¹ Godley 2001, I, 5.

³² See Gantz 2004, 634-658.

made no reparation, so neither would he. So he carried off Helen» (§3).³³ Herodotus speaks about “second generation” because the sons of the Argonauts participated in the Trojan war. Although Herodotus does not mention the sea, it is obvious from the context that the abduction of Helen took place at sea.

«From Homer onwards, Helen’s abduction was traditionally seen as the acknowledged “cause” of the Trojan war» – says David Asheri³⁴. This is the opinion of the Persians, as well, because they say: «We of Asia regarded the rape of our woman not at all; but the Greeks, all for the sake of a Lacedaemonian woman, mustered a great host, came to Asia, and destroyed the power of Priam. Ever since we have regarded Greeks as our enemies» (§4)³⁵. Herodotus does not mention the sea here, but the sentence «the Greeks, mustered a great host, came to Asia» (Ἕλληνας ... στόλον μέγαν συναγεῖραι ... ἐλθόντας ἐς τὴν Ἀσίην) reminds us of the long poetical *Catalogue of Ships* of the Iliad, which enumerates the contingents from the different regions of Greece. This catalogue «is seemingly based on an old list of the naval forces that assembled at Aulis at the start of the campaign and carefully records how many ships each leader had with him» – writes G. S. Kirk³⁶.

Summing up we can state, that the preface of Herodotus’ work is a rhetorical masterpiece precisely because it mirrors the character of his *Histories*.

This preface reflects the agreeable and varied narrative technique, that is, Herodotus likes to expound historical events in interesting short stories and in dramatized forms³⁷; e.g. there have been books published in Hungary under the title *Herodotean short stories*, which had a great success among young people³⁸.

This preface emphasizes well that in Herodotus’ *Histories* – besides historical events – myths, religions, fiction and women play an important part; e.g. the wife of Candaules (I 8-13), Tomyris, the queen of the Massagetae (I 205-216), the daughter of Otanes (III 66-69) and so on. Although in these beautiful short stories fiction often prevails, from this fact it does not follow that everything is fictitious in Herodotus’ work³⁹.

The preface has two parts. The first part is the opening sentence; the second one – chapters 1-5. These two parts reflect the double cultural background of the work: 1. the poetic tradition (epic, lyric poetry and tragedy), 2. the Ionian science,

³³ Godley 2001, I, 5.

³⁴ Asheri *et al.* 2007, 77.

³⁵ Godley 2001, I, 7.

³⁶ Kirk 1989, 14.

³⁷ See Waterfield 2009, 485-494.

³⁸ Szabó 1959.

³⁹ See Balcer 1987, 11-12; Erbse 1991, 131-150.

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the teaching of the Sophists and the science of Hippocratic⁴⁰.

In the Herodotean research the question arose: are Herodotus' *Histories* unfinished? The affirmative answer of David Asheri is as follows: «Ends, or rather breaks off. At least an epilogue is missing. A work of this scope could not end with an incidental anecdote, inspired in turn by another anecdote about a minor character»⁴¹. But if we take into consideration that the preface also closes with a wise saying, so the end of the preface and that of the whole work harmonize, that is, the work is finished, too. The end of the preface reads so: «For many states that were once great have now become small: and those that were great in my time were small formerly. Knowing therefore that human prosperity never continues in one stay, I will make mention alike of both kinds» (I 5);⁴² and the end of the work is as follows: «“Soft lands breed soft men; wondrous fruits of the earth and valiant warriors grow not from the same soil.» Thereat the Persians saw that Cyrus reasoned better than they, and they departed from before him, choosing rather to be rulers on a barren mountain side than slaves dwelling in tilled valleys» (IX 122).⁴³

The structure of the preface is also similar to that of the whole; *e.g.* at the end of the preface the Greek occupation of Troy is mentioned, in the last chapters of the last book the Greek naval expedition to the Hellespont is recounted, and the Athenian occupation of Sestos. In both events the sea and the navy had a crucial importance. This statement is in accordance with what Herodotus writes elsewhere on the sea: «who is of all creatures the most serviceable for man» κατά περ τὴν πάντων χρησιμωτάτην ἀνθρώποισι θάλασσαν, VII 16), especially for Greeks⁴⁴.

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⁴⁰ Asheri *et al.* 2007, 49; Corcella 1984, 19: «Erodoto, “il primo storico”, non fa appunto eccezione: da un lato egli narra le varie vicende nei loro minimi dettagli, anche se *insignificanti*; ma dall'altro, come individua somiglianze e differenze nell'ambito della natura, riscontrando quindi regolarità ricondotte all'azione di leggi generali, così tende spesso a concepire i diversi e sempre mutevoli eventi *per analogiam*, strutturando il divenire storico secondo schemi che si ripetono, e vedono all'opera sempre gli stessi fattori»: *ibid.*, 41: «La nuova via “laica” di approccio all'*aphanés* è quindi, fin dalle testimonianze dell'*epos*, il riscontro di somiglianze tra due o più oggetti, mediante il quale uno di essi – meno conosciuto – viene illuminato: è, cioè, l'analogia». See also Rihl 2003, 168-190.

⁴¹ Asheri *et al.* 2007, 10.

⁴² Godley 2001, I, 9.

⁴³ Godley 2001, IV, 301.

⁴⁴ West 2003, 151-167.

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Abstract

My position is that the opening sentence and the first five chapters must be regarded as the prologue which has been written with „preconceived formal concepts”. Herodotus took these concepts from rhetoric. The prologue consists of two parts. The first part is the opening sentence which gives the title and alludes to the subject and the general aim of the work. The second part of the prologue deals with the Persian, Phoenician, and Herodotean discussion of mythical origins of the conflict between Asia and Europe. In the original version, Zeus as womanizer impregnates Io, and the jealous Hera turns her into a white cow, fleeing a gadfly, who finally arrives in Egypt. Herodotus rationalizes this original myth of Io, and in his rationalized story, the sea and the ships play an important part. So the first wrong was done by the Phoenicians who abducted Io by ship, and sailed away for Egypt. Next certain Greeks landed at Tyre in Phoenice and carried off the king's daughter Europe. According to the original Cretan myth „Europe arrived at Crete riding the back of a bull-shaped Zeus”. Herodotus rationalized this myth, too, and it is clear from the situation, that the abduction of Europe happened on a ship at sea.