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HERODOTUS

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HERODOTUS

WITH AN ENGLISH TRANSLATION BY

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HON. FELLOW OF MAGDALEN COLLEGE, OXFORD

IN FOUR VOLUMES

II

BOOKS III AND IV



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INTRODUCTION TO BOOKS III AND IV

HERODOTUS' narrative in the Third Book of his history is extremely discursive and episodic. It may be briefly summarised as follows:—

Chapters 1 to 38 deal in the main with Cambyses. They relate the Persian invasion and conquest of Egypt, Cambyses' abortive expedition against the Ethiopians, and the sacrilegious and cruel acts of the last part of his reign. The section 38–60 begins with an account of Polycrates of Samos, and his relations with Amasis of Egypt, and continues with a narrative of Polycrates' war against his banished subjects. The fact that these latter were aided not only by Spartans but by Corinthians serves to introduce the story of the domestic feuds of Periander, despot of Corinth. Chapter 61 resumes the story of Cambyses; the Magian usurpation of the Persian throne, Cambyses' death, the counterplot against and ultimate overthrow of the pseudo-Smerdis and his brother by seven Persian conspirators, and the accession of Darius—all this is narrated with much

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picturesque and dramatic detail in twenty-eight chapters (61-88). Then follows a list of Darius' tributary provinces (88-97), supplemented by various unconnected details relating to Arabia and India (98-117). The next thirty-two chapters (118-149) narrate various events in the early part of Darius' reign: the fate of Polycrates of Samos; the insolence and death of his murderer Oroetes; how Democedes, a Samian physician, rose to power at the Persian court and was sent with a Persian commission to reconnoitre Greek coasts; how Polycrates' brother Syloson regained with Persian help the sovereignty of Samos. Lastly, chapters 150-160 describe the revolt and second capture of Babylon.

Book IV begins with the intention of describing Darius' invasion of Scythia, and the subject of more than two-thirds of the book is Scythian geography and history. Chapters 1-15 deal with the legendary origin of the Scythians; 16-31, with the population of the country and the climate of the far north; this leads to a disquisition on the Hyperboreans and their alleged commerce with the Aegean (32-36), and (37-45) a parenthetical section, showing the relation to each other of Europe, Asia, and Libya. The story of a circumnavigation of Libya forms part of this section. Chapters 46-58 enumerate the rivers of Scythia, and 59-82 describe its manners and customs.

Darius' passage of the Hellespont and the Danube is

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narrated in chapters 83–98. Chapters 99–117 are once more parenthetical, describing first the general outline of Scythia, and next giving some details as to neighbouring tribes, with the story of the Amazons. From 118 to 144 Herodotus professes to relate the movements of the Persian and Scythian armies, till Darius returns to the Danube and thence to Asia again.

The Libyan part of the book begins at 145. Twenty-three chapters (145–167) give the history of Cyrene, its colonisation from Greece and the fortunes of its rulers till the time of Darius, when it was brought into contact with Persia by the appeal of its exiled queen Pheretime to the Persian governor of Egypt, who sent an army to recover Cyrene for her. The thirty-two following chapters (168–199) are a detailed description of Libya: 168–180, the Libyan seaboard from Egypt to the Tritonian lake; 181–190, the sandy ridge inland stretching (according to Herodotus) from Thebes in Egypt to the Atlas; 191–199, in the main, Libya west of the “Tritonian lake.” At chapter 200 the story of Pheretime is resumed and the capture of Barce described. The book ends with the death of Pheretime and the disastrous return to Egypt of her Persian allies.

The above brief abstract shows that Book IV, at least, is full of geography and ethnology. It is, I believe, generally held that Herodotus himself

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visited the Cyrenaica and the northern coasts of the Black Sea, where the Greek commercial centre was the "port of the Borysthenites," later called Olbia; but there is no real evidence for or against such visits. The point is not very important. If he did not actually go to Cyrene or Olbia he must at least have had opportunities of conversing with Greeks resident in those places. These, the only informants whose language he could understand, no doubt supplied him with more or less veracious descriptions of the "hinterlands" of their cities; and possibly there may have been some documentary evidence—records left by former travellers. Whatever Herodotus' authorities—and they must have been highly miscellaneous—they take him farther and farther afield, to the extreme limits of knowledge or report.

As Herodotus in description or speculation approaches what he supposes to be the farthest confines of north and south, it is natural that he should also place on record his conception of the geography of the world—a matter in which he professes himself to be in advance of the ideas current in his time. There were already, it would appear, maps in those days. According to Herodotus, they divided the world into three equal parts—Europe, Asia, Libya; the whole surrounded by the "Ocean," which was still apparently imagined, as in Homer, to be a "river" into which ships could sail from the sea known to the Greeks. Possibly, as has been

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suggested by moderns, this idea of an encircling river may have originated in the fact that to north, south, and east great rivers ran in the farthest lands known to Greeks: the Nile in the south (and if it could be made to run partly from west to east, so much the better for the belief that it was a boundary), the Danube in the north, the Euphrates in the east; in the west, of course, the untravelled waters outside the "Pillars of Hercules" fitted into the scheme. But whether the legend of an encircling stream had a rational basis or not, Herodotus will have none of it. The Greeks, he says, believe the world to be surrounded by the Ocean; but they cannot prove it. The thing, to him, is ridiculous; as is also the neat tripartite division of the world into three continents of equal extent. His own scheme is different. Taking the highlands of Persia as a base, he makes Asia a peninsula stretching westward, and Libya another great peninsula south-westward; northward and alongside of the two is the vast tract called Europe. This latter, in his view, is beyond comparison bigger than either Asia or Libya; its length from east to west is at least equal to the length of the other two together; and while there are at least traditions of the circumnavigation of Libya, and some knowledge of seas to the south and east of Asia, Europe stretches to the north in tracts of illimitable distance, the very absence of any tale of a northern boundary tending in itself to prove

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enormous extent. The lands north and south of the Mediterranean have each its great river; and Herodotus has already in the Second Book endeavoured to show that there is a kind of correspondence between the Nile and the Danube. He, too, like the geographers with whom he disagrees, is obsessed, in the absence of knowledge, by a desire for symmetry. The Nile, he is convinced, flows for a long way across the country of the Ethiopians from west to east before it makes a bend to the north and flows thus through Egypt. So the Danube, too, rises in the far west of Europe, in the country of "Pyrene"; and as the Nile eventually turns and flows northward, so the Danube, after running for a long way eastward, makes an abrupt turn southward to flow into the Black Sea. Thus the Mediterranean countries, southern Europe and northern Africa, are made to lie within what the two rivers—their mouths being regarded as roughly "opposite" to each other, in the same longitude—make into a sort of interrupted parallelogram.

Such is the scheme of the world with which Herodotus incidentally presents us. But his real concern in the Fourth Book is with the geography of Libya and Scythia—northern Africa and southern Russia; in both cases the description is germane to his narrative, its motive being, in each, a Persian expedition into the country.

Critics of the *Odyssey* have sometimes been at

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pains to distinguish its "inner" from its "outer" geography—the inner true and real, the outer a world of mere invention and fairy tale. There is no such distinction really; Greeks do not invent fairy tales; there are simply varying degrees of certitude. Greek geographical knowledge contemporaneous with the composition of the *Odyssey* being presumably confined within very narrow limits, the frontiers of the known are soon passed, and the poet launches out into a realm not of invention, but of reality dimly and imperfectly apprehended—a world of hearsay and travellers' tales, no doubt adorned in the Homeric poem with the colours of poetry. Homer is giving the best that he knows of current information—not greatly troubled in his notices of remote countries by inconsistencies, as when he describes Egypt once as a four or five days' sail from Crete, yet again as a country so distant that even a bird will take more than a year to reach it. Herodotus' method is as human and natural as Homer's. Starting, of course, from a very much wider extent of geographical knowledge, he passes from what he has seen to what he knows at first hand from Cyrenaean or Borysthenite evidence; thence into more distant regions, about which his informants have been told; and so on, the accuracy of his statements obviously diminishing (and not guaranteed by himself) as the distance increases, till at last in farthest north—farthest, that is, with the

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possible exception of "Hyperboreans," about whom nobody knows anything—he is in the country of the griffins who guard gold and pursue the one-eyed Arimasian; and in the south, among the men who have no heads, and whose eyes are in their breasts.

It happens sometimes that the stories which have reached Herodotus from very distant lands and seas, and which he duly reports without necessarily stating his belief in them, do in truth rest on a basis of actual fact. Thus one of the strongest arguments for the truth of the story of a circumnavigation of Libya is the detail, mentioned but not believed by Herodotus, that the sailors, when sailing west at the extreme limit of their voyage, saw the sun on their right hand. Thus also the story of Hyperborean communication with Delos is entirely in harmony with ascertained fact. Whatever be the meaning of "Hyperborean," a term much discussed by the learned (Herodotus certainly understands the name to mean "living beyond the north wind"), the people so named must be located in northern Europe; and the Delos story, however imaginative in its details, does at least illustrate the known existence of trade routes linking the northern parts of our continent with the Aegean. To such an extent Herodotus' tales of the uttermost parts of the earth are informative. But with such exceptions, as one would naturally expect, it is true that as a