

**Sean Sheehan. *A Guide to Reading Herodotus' Histories*.** Bloomsbury Academic: London and New York: 2018. xiii + 316. ISBN 9781474292665.

Sheehan acutely notes that “If the *Histories* were a website, it would be littered with hyperlinks...” (5), an appropriate update of Macan’s nineteenth century metaphor--“the Herodotus bazaar.” In addition to describing exotic man-made objects and natural wonders, Herodotus favors accounts of cultural practices that “contradict” Hellenic beliefs and customs, as his history zigzags forwards (and backwards). Herodotus’ text offers patterns and polemics that provide conscious “discursive practices.” One of these, akin to the “butterfly effect,” emphasizes how small personal causes can have huge national consequences (130).

Herodotus, like many Greek authors, often highlights such unexpected and “unintended consequences” (7). He shares this inclination (I would note) with his Oedipal successor, Thucydides, another collector of lethal ironies signposted by τὸ παράλογον, τὸ ἀδόκητον of human acts and events. Herodotus’ persons usually remain “unaware of larger consequences” of their choices—until it is too late for them to pull back, e.g., Adrastus, Cyno, Cyrus, Cambyses, Democedes, Miltiades, Xerxes, Darius’ treatment of Histiaeus (159)—perhaps for everyone but wise-adviser Solon and trickster Themistocles!

Sheehan’s book, like Herodotus’, takes an anecdotal approach to its subject. He claims to peruse Herodotus’ work as a “literary historian.”<sup>1</sup> His tools, however, are literary, not historiographical, and insufficiently attentive to Herodotus’ antecedents and successors (e.g., Hecataeus and Ctesias). He eschews examination of other evidence (topographical, epigraphical, archaeological, poetic) for the battles, political upheavals, and ethnographies that Herodotus reports. In the over-arching analytic part One, “Approaches,” after introducing the author and his work in categories entitled “a literary historian,” “ethnographer,” and “the *Histories* as literature,” he intelligently isolates several leading themes and patterns. Then, three quarters of the book provide “Commentary,” mini-surveys for perplexed readers, explaining discrete, often clearly begun and ended, ringed runs of Herodotus’ narrative. Both novices and experts have sometimes failed to perceive any defensible, larger organization.

Sheehan repeatedly acknowledges that bewilderment is respectable, since his subject’s “narrative possesses a cast of over 900 named individuals<sup>2</sup> and nearly 700 locations” (34). Book Four, for instance, “is not... the most reader-friendly” (131, ditto for Five, 153; cf. 166). One meets history, geography, anecdotalish novellae, ethnography, more history, etc. Sheehan misconceives the ways that ancient hearers and readers

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<sup>1</sup> Is a “literary historian” to be defined as a historian of the development of literature, or a historian who can write decent and conceptually complex prose with the skills of an epicist, tragedian, and philosopher? Sheehan clearly intends the latter, but since the epithet belongs to Herodotus no more and perhaps less than to Thucydides or Tacitus, the descriptor seems misplaced.

<sup>2</sup> Not to mention too many Arta-compounded Persian names, perhaps nineteen, at least five Artabanoi!

comprehended facts and features differently from current college students. We need to explain the organization that we have rather than lament how Herodotus “jumps around” and did not provide the structures that twenty-first century readers unconsciously expect.

Over forty text-boxes outline Book contents or list examples of specific topics such as “Mixed Motives” (129) listing “revenge, resentment,” “debts of gratitude,” “private reason,” and “public reason” with good examples. Sheehan’s prose is generally clear to ambitious students,<sup>3</sup> despite vocabulary outliers like “fissiparous,” “lacustrine,” and “deictic” (10, 159, 163). Further, although Sheehan correctly notes that “Readers will benefit by consulting maps” (133, 202), his *Guide* provides none.

“Approaches to Herodotus” is often sensitive and insightful, despite some hindering and wasted, theory-famous name-dropping arising from Sheehan’s own background (e.g., Hegel, Forster, Benjamin, Genette, Althusser, Greenblatt, Lenin, Žižek). Newcomers to Herodotus can read “Approaches” with profit; Sheehan’s reading of recent interpretive scholarship analyzing Herodotus is wide (not critical). He correctly ascribes to Herodotus “conceptual sophistication,” cross-book connections, and other narrative skills. He flags the important theme, for instance, of crossings, by boat and bridge (153), although he fails to credit Renate von Scheliha’s 1931 Breslau monograph on water boundaries. She included river-crossings, such as the Halys, the Gyndes, the Araxes, the Euphrates, the Ister, and the Danube (204). This motif for connecting imperial aggressions gives a rhyme to the Persians’ and others’ campaigns. Occasional use of current terminology makes the book more accessible (e.g., Aristagoras’ sales pitch, the Cyclades’ consumer therapy, Xerxes’ mood swings, a fashion show catalogue for Xerxes’ troops). I had to look up Hibernian slang “banjaxed,” because its use banjaxed me.

Sheehan thankfully rejects the sloppy image of the “naive storyteller” who can’t help telling a foolish story (despite backsliding, p.15: “too good a tale to bury,” cf. 136: “he cannot help but find himself addressing”). This crutch and worm-hole of authorial incontinence assisted dismissive critics for many centuries prior to the last fifty years (i.e., pre-Immerwahr), helping them escape having to explain many a long, or even short, narrative’s inclusion. Herodotus, we know, doubts or controverts many of his informants’ orally transmitted narratives, but, as he reiterates, he “tells what he’s been told” (7.152.3, cf. 2.123.1, 4.195.2, etc.), when a narrative seems worthy, or necessary, to him and his audiences. Sheehan’s discussion of Herodotean revenge, grudge, and vengeance, within his discussion of cause, is strong. *Tisis* (reciprocity) and the under-theorized “Fate”<sup>4</sup> and its many Greek approximations remain hazy. Sheehan recognizes that “the divine” is “not an alibi for not having” explanations because “his primary interest remains ...human behavior” (25; cf. 53 n.35). Thus, Herodotus offers an “

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<sup>3</sup> Sheehan’s earlier publications include *The British Museum Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Ancient Greece* (2002), *Socrates: Life and Times* (2007), *Žižek: A Guide for the Perplexed* (2012), and *Sophocles’ Oedipus the King: A Reader’s Guide* (2012).

<sup>4</sup> A lazy word that I cannot understand even in English.

intricate archipelago of explanations.” Sheehan recognizes that the historian—anyone reading this review—selects a causal chain of events to “explain” a known result; that’s our job. We group chosen events in our retrospective arguments, try to account for stubborn facts that disconfirm our reconstructions, establish connections, and show the “necessity” brought about by the selected links—evading arrogant certainty, meta-narrational and coercive self-assertion. Modern historians advance by strategies of explanation including argument, emplotment, and ideological assumptions (Hayden White’s “meta-history”). Current historiographers downplay stupidity and “luck” as explanations, also individuals as effective causes. The ecclesiastical motive of divine providence, akin to Herodotus’ *theiê tychê*, “wondrous fortune” or “divine accidents,” became the rule in Christian and common in other theologically inflected historiographies. Contemporary semi-conscious constructions of coherency in written narratives differ from Herodotus’ connective webs, ring-compositions, interlaced narratives, emphasis on individuals (e.g., the Ionian revolt, 161), and frequent, non-committal *non liquet*. “But for” personal contingencies moderate many of Herodotus’ pessimistic/ realistic explanations. His “ventriloquial voice” can be overheard in the accounts and cautions of Solon and Artabanus (199). Such alien constructions justify presenting a readers’ guide.

Boeotian Plutarch insults—or tries to insult in his provincially--Herodotus as *philobarbaros*. The exile traveled from Ionian Halikarnassos to mainland Athens and Sparta to Thurioi in southern Italy. He also sailed to many other non-Hellenic harbors in the Black Sea, lower Egypt, Phoenicia, and Africa/Libya. His cosmopolitan exposure led him to “deflate Greek ethnocentrism.” He happily records “barbarian” as well as Hellenic firsts and other memorable deeds (helpful and cruel) around the Mediterranean and in the remote hinterlands of three continents. He cheerfully mocks cultural pretensions as a “cultural cartographer” mapping through time and across territory. He can focalize through Persian and Phocian personalities what is “taken for granted,” beliefs and habits among “foreigners”. A useful discussion of *nomoi* enriches the end of Sheehan’s introduction. Sheehan recognizes Herodotus’ protagonists’ dry and deadpan wit (37), a virtue shared with Cyrus, Amasis, and word-shy Spartans. Herodotus himself mocks Hellenic jingoism and parochial or familial chauvinism such as the source of Alcmaeon’s wealth and an exposé of the empty, late-built tombs at Plataea (30, engaging fraud at 9.85). Sheehan does not bridle at the latitude of Herodotus’ self-imposed remit, in which ethnography has explanatory force for an adequate historiography. He also recognizes Herodotus’ “acute and sympathetic awareness of personal anguish” and vulnerability, a rare if not impermissible dimension for modern historians.

The intended audience for the following “Commentary” is hard to determine. Sheehan identifies self-contained<sup>5</sup> narratives (“Croesus as King,” “The March to the Ister,” “Sparta and Aristagoras,” “Thermopylae,” “Plataea’s Aftermath”) and then devotes a page or two

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<sup>5</sup> But one acknowledges that nearly every subject or object imbricates many others in Herodotus’ inclusive vision.

to each, sometimes more. Like his author, his attention span and breadth is unpredictable.<sup>6</sup> Like his author (e.g., 6.14: best fighters at Lade?, 7.54: Xerxes repentant?), Sheehan reasonably leaves numerous issues unadjudicated.

For example, Herodotus allots 46 “chapters” (about 24 pages in Wilson’s *OCT*) to “The Marathon Campaign,” while Sheehan devotes five pages of comment and two boxes. These boxes collect references to “The Alcmaeonids,” 12 passages re-arranged into chronological order, and a mixed bag of fifteen divine-human stories--“Impieties, Epiphanies, Curses and Divine Messages”--summarizing passages from book 6 in textual order. The commentary may avail students of literature in translation, should they pause to pick up this proposed *vademecum*. Budding historians will experience frustration.

Referring readers to modern writers interpreting Herodotus’ lacunose accounts of ancient military conflict, Sheehan scants logistics, strategy, and tactics, thus aborting adequate account of (say) the battle of Marathon.<sup>7</sup> He prefers to discuss the surrounding, worthwhile but subordinate stories of Pan, Philippides, Epizelos and his enemy phantom, and the Alcmaeonids. Sheehan here depends heavily on a questionable hypothesis of Emily Baragwanath (*Motivation and Narrative in Herodotus*, 2008) for Herodotus’ ambivalent chronicle of the Alcmaeonid clan. It distinguishes an unreliable and ironic, virtual author persona of “Herodotos” from “the supreme narrator” Herodotos (186–9, mistaking 6.21 for 6.121). The former stalwartly defends the clan from exhibiting the treasonous shield-signal to the Persian charge, while the latter scatters information in books I, V, and VI that questions the “tyrant-hater” image that the clan projected for itself. Such an argument should not fail to cite the Athenian archon list inscription (Meiggs-Lewis #6) in which an Alcmaeonid Kleisthenes appears *during* the tyrants’ conciliatory phase during their tenure of power. Since the clan comprised a powerful “swing” family in a contentious *polis*, we expect that neither their motives nor their manoeuvres were ideologically or practically pure. Political gang Capos never maintain entirely clean hands. Their very eponym was a gold-greedy trickster. Herodotus’ willingness to report both patriotic and questionably moral acts (bribery of the Pythia!, deceptions of the Lacedaemonians! 5.63-5) insufficiently supports the speculation that two Herodotoi pilot the same *logos*.

Without recourse to Wolfgang Iser’s “Reader-Response” theories, readers know that Herodotus leaves many issues unresolved for his audience(s). He explicitly announces the reader’s autonomy in negotiating doubts, a sign of his prudent non-committedness and admitted fallibility (1.139: investigate it yourself!, 3.122.1 *et alibi*: take your

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<sup>6</sup> We miss Astyages’ misinterpretations of dreams about Princess Mandane’s genito-urinary tract, but no one can include all Herodotus’ examples of mistaken motivations (1.107–8): Μανδάνην, τὴν ἐδόκει Ἀστυάγης ἐν τῷ ὕπνῳ οὐρῆσαι τοσοῦτον ὥστε πληῖσαι τὴν ἑωυτοῦ πόλιν, ἐπικατακλύσαι δὲ καὶ τὴν Ἀσίην πᾶσαν.

<sup>7</sup> When he reports (176) the number of Samian triremes at Lade as 119 rather than 60, his usual reticence seems laudable. Confusion is evident when he states (213) that “the Persian conscripts ...die alongside the Thespians and Spartans,” or confuses Protesilaus with Artayctes (246), or confuses Phanes’ terrible punishment with vengeance on his behalf (248).

choice!). Herodotus is emphatic that a shield was raised in the hills above Marathon, and equally emphatic that it was not by an Almaeonid. The page separating the damning charge of collusion and Medism from the historian's detailed refutation (itself a page: 6.121–4) carries on the immediate post-battle narrative of the Persians' sailing around Sunium, supernatural battle-related "visions," the displacement of the conquered Eretrians, and the "morning-after" Spartan warrior-tourists. The narrative sequence is typically Herodotean. It does not interrupt the sequelae in order to show that the (hidden) author suspected that the Alcmaeonids were in bed with Hippias and the Persians. Herodotus' prose is supple but not esoteric, as Sheehan elsewhere recognizes (241). I discuss this passage at length to illustrate Sheehan's honest but problematic methods, limited historical research, and inadequate presentation of important historical questions.

Sheehan retells parts of a story, such as "Candaules' wife" or "Pharaoh Pheros the misogynist," in such a way that one needs to re-examine again Herodotus' account to understand Sheehan's intelligent comment—a choice that is no choice, like Arion's (69). Sheehan appreciates Herodotus' (and his characters') underrated sense of humor, with which he ridicules Athenians and Ionian pretensions. Herodotus also appreciates Spartans' anomalous laconicity, subverts Persian claims to truthfulness, and punctures Greek myths of origin (cf. 2.45, very Hecataean), but he also allows despots their merciful moments. Human choices, based on pride more than prudence (107), ignore likely consequences. Contingency is powerful in explaining unimaginable upsets, and laughter signals "something uncongenial in the offing" (228). Histiaeus emerges from his rich but discontinuous narratives as a folk-tale trickster. Although Sheehan diligently cites many authorities, more than occasionally he will write "it is alleged by some [scholars]" without a citation. I chuckled when he writes that Rhampsinitus' *logos* "would not be out of place in a Grimm-like collection of folktales" (107), since, as Wolf Aly (1921) and Rosaria Munson (1993) *inter alios* noted, the Grimms' *Der Meisterdieb* does present many clear parallels (#192, cf. 2.121, with Egyptian origins).

Sheehan or his proofreader misspells or mistransliterates many names: "Aminocles, Amon, Cyclon [the aspiring Athenian tyrant], Niniveh, Scycles, Sylsson," two humans named "Dionysus," Artanabus, Wçowski, S. Bernadette, and, most troubling yet, Xerexes. I began to wonder about his grasp of Greek after meeting *to theoi, arkhkakoi*, and improper (lack of) word division: *pleistathômasia, paidashybristas*. Sheehan disconcertingly misrepresents Greek and even English words: "*apodeiknimi,*" *eleutheroisiê*," "anacronical," "excentric" "sore bestead." His translations must be checked, e.g., he renders *genomena* as "achievements" or "accomplishments" (62), rather than something more ethically neutral, such as "events." An extensive bibliography and general index close the volume.

The book contains valuable observations<sup>8</sup> and points thematic connections between disparate stories,<sup>9</sup> but one must use it with caution. Sheehan like many others puzzles

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<sup>8</sup> E.g., only two speeches in Herodotus offer extended narratives (184 on 5.92, 6.86).

over Herodotus' ending with "the advice of Cyrus" anecdote, but the choice mini-drama clearly points to another greedy, exploitative option. A ruler leads his countrymen down the one-way path that unjustly subjects independent foreign nations to exploitation and oppression. Athenians, are you listening?

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<sup>9</sup> Sheehan connects 1.153, 5.73, and 5.105, in which disbelieving Persians ask "who are these Athenians/Spartans?", a trope of Hellenic self-deprecation or Persian ignorance. He notes the leaps into the void of Arion, Boges, and Prexaspes (209)—suicidal acts insisting on their personal agency.