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Review Of "Divinity And History: The Religion Of Herodotus" By T. Harrison

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Recommended Citation

Rosaria Vignolo Munson. (2001). "Review Of "Divinity And History: The Religion Of Herodotus" By T. Harrison". *Bryn Mawr Classical Review*.
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Thomas Harrison, Divinity and History: The Religion of Herodotus. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. Pp. 320. ISBN 0-19-825291-4.

 bmcr.brynmawr.edu/2001/2001-08-17.html

Bryn Mawr Classical Review

Bryn Mawr Classical Review 2001.08.17

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Word count: 457 words

Munson on Harrison on Munson on Harrison: reply to BMCR 01.07.05

I will not go on at length and answer Dr Harrison point by point. But I feel compelled to remark that his statement that I misrepresent his arguments is unjustified. The general thesis of his book is threefold: 1) religious concerns are central to Herodotus' world-view; 2) Herodotus' religious beliefs are based on contemporary Greek notions of divine matters and 3) they are often unconscious and unexamined.

As I make clear in my review, I entirely agree with 1. I also largely agree with 2 (though I would have liked to have seen a more detailed argument about how Herodotus interacts with ideas on religion that were current in his time). But the point Dr Harrison most frequently reiterates in his discussion of almost every branch of Herodotus' religious thought is 3. My review includes many quotations of Dr Harrison's words and shows how insistently he argues 3, also explaining why I profoundly object to this part of his thesis.

I disagree further with Dr Harrison when he protests in his response that my language is vehement. My word 'silly' is no more dismissive, for example, than 'fanciful', a qualification which Dr Harrison applies to ideas (good ones, in my opinion) of both Immerwahr and Cooper (see Harrison, 119 n53, 249n4). I should perhaps have used 'very unconvincing', explaining why in each of the particular cases. But I was already worried about the length of my review, and I do not now want to add further criticisms.

At the end of his response, Dr Harrison suggests that his book is bound to be controversial because it questions 'modern canonical opinion'. This is actually not the case (I myself only referred the word 'canonical' to the current view that Herodotus makes a distinction between mythical and historical time, a view which I think Dr Harrison rejects much too drastically; see pp. 196-207). Dr Harrison's central idea that one cannot draw together different strands of Herodotus' thought (see, for example, his pages 240-41) actually follows in a long tradition of readers who have considered Herodotus a great artist perhaps, but not a very deep thinker. Dr Harrison's book is, however, polemical, in the sense that it often condescendingly dismisses the valuable contributions of scholars for whom the Histories reveal an author more self-conscious than Dr Harrison apparently sees him. Given his polemical approach, then, Dr Harrison should not be 'taken aback' if his thesis is countered with evidence and argument from some of those in the other camp. My forthcoming book examines the freedom and cleverness of Herodotus; I anticipate reading Dr Harrison's review of it, written with the reasoned criticism and gentle style he says he admires.