



## Myth, Truth, and Narrative in Herodotus

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# Herodotus and the Heroic Age: The Case of Minos

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## Abstract and Keywords

In the fifth century, traditional myths about gods and heroes of a remote age still constituted a shared cultural language for speaking about a variety of more or less specific current issues of a philosophical, ethical, social, and political nature. Other than tragedy and epinician poetry, we should especially remember the role of myth in Thucydides, whose 'Archaeology' sets down his fundamental, and ideologically charged, view of history. It is time to reassess Herodotus' participation in this contemporary coded discourse and examine the ways in which he uses the mythical past as well as the cases when he appears to signal his choice not to use it. One dismissive passage in Herodotus (3.122) confirms the significance of Minos — the focus of this chapter — in fifth-century discourse as a precursor or rival of Athenian thalassocracy (Thucydides and Bacchylides). But two additional mentions, in Books 1 and 7 respectively, connect Minos in more interesting ways to present realities of Greeks and non-Greeks in the East and West. How is the treatment of Minos in the *Histories* representative of Herodotus' 'myth-speak'?

*Keywords:* Trojan War, heroic age, thucydides, minos, Polycrates, Hearsay, akoê, Historiê, Protesilaus, Theseus

I would like to consider the extent to which Herodotus attributes to myth a legitimate role in a work that memorializes the past. I will use the terms 'myth' and 'mythical' in a restricted sense, to denote Greek narratives about the heroic age from the beginning of time to the Trojan War.<sup>1</sup> For the Greeks the heroic age was ancient history to the extent that they always regarded mythical narratives

as having at least a kernel of truth.<sup>2</sup> Thucydides extracts from these narratives a plausible account by turning heroes into human beings who respond to similar economic and political motives as contemporary men; he also attempts to combine the information he can reasonably extract from the poets with other available signs of the past. The resulting historiography is better than nothing but, as Thucydides himself (**p.196**) comes close to acknowledging, not very satisfactory.<sup>3</sup> It is a circular construct, based on the observation of the forces that shape more recent events. Conversely, it is also more useful for arguing a certain interpretation of the present than for truly learning something new about the remote past.

Thucydides considers the entire past, heroic or not, difficult for us to negotiate for the subjective reason that we are badly informed about it. For Herodotus, on the other hand, the heroic age is a special sort of past that also objectively partakes of another level of reality. This is evident from a famous interpretative gloss, to which we will return several times, where Herodotus makes a distinction between the sixth-century tyrant of Samos Polycrates and the mythical Minos of Crete (3.122.2):

Polycrates wanted to rule the sea [*thalassokrateein*] and was the first among the Greeks to do so, as far as we know [*prōtos...tōn hēmeis idmen*], aside from [*parex*] Minos of Cnossus or anyone who may have gained control of the sea earlier than Minos; but in the so-called human race [*tēs...legomenēs anthrōpēiēs geneēs*], Polycrates was the first, very much expecting to rule both Ionia and the islands. (3.122.2)

While Polycrates is part of ‘the so-called human race’, Minos and other sea-rulers who may have come before him were from an earlier time and belonged to a stock of beings that Herodotus cannot even name but that he appears to regard, here and in some other passages of the *Histories*, as in some ways qualitatively different.<sup>4</sup> The most important difference must no doubt be that Herodotus assigns to the heroic age a category of true heroes, bigger in size—like Orestes, whose coffin measured seven cubits (1.68.3)—with special connections to the gods, even sometimes themselves called *theoi*, sometimes with temples and cults, and sometimes exercising supernatural powers after their death.<sup>5</sup> Herodotus carefully avoids vouching for (**p.197**) the divine parentage of heroes in explicit terms, but he does not deny it, either.<sup>6</sup> In one instance (2.45) he even stops to apologize to gods and heroes, when his enquiry almost leads him to conclude that the Greek Heracles, the son of Alcmena and Amphitryon (2.43.2; cf. 6.53.2), was a distinct being from the Egyptian god Heracles and wholly a man.

For Herodotus, however, these super-human beings, which at 3.122.2 he seems to discount as beyond history, are also important reference points for the human and properly historical past. More or less directly or intentionally they have

helped to shape the world such as it is in Herodotus' time, especially with regard to the origins and identity of peoples.<sup>7</sup> In his ambivalence towards the heroic age, Herodotus bypasses Thucydides' position at both ends of the spectrum. On the one hand, unlike Thucydides, he represents the heroic age as something different from less remote periods. On the other hand, he also seems more confident than Thucydides that specific events from the heroic time, though not, as we shall see, a global picture, can be recovered accurately from local *akoē*, 'hearsay'.<sup>8</sup> Herodotus' historical horizon, at any rate, is exceptionally broad, and he needs the heroic age more than Thucydides does. He goes **(p.198)** back to it again and again in the course of his work, evaluating each time the quality of the available data and inviting us to do the same.

Although Herodotus, as we often say, organizes experience by patterns, he is at the same time suspicious of them. The contradictory characteristics he attributes to the heroic age (different but real, of fundamental importance but difficult to know) cause him especially to dislike the fictitious sort of knowledge that derives from the practice of playing with myth to create conceptual constructs and patterns of a pseudo-historical sort. It is even doubtful, in fact, that he would have approved of Thucydides' so-called *Archaeology*, as brilliantly rational as it appears now to us.<sup>9</sup>

Herodotus, in fact, critiques a cruder specimen of such constructs in the proem of the *Histories* (1.1-5). Here he reports that, according to those Persians who are *logioi* (competent, well educated), a series of abductions of heroic-age women (Io, Europa, Medea, and Helen) escalated into the Trojan War. This war represented the beginning and first cause of the centuries-old enmity between East and West that will culminate in the Persian Wars. According to the Persians, then, the East-West conflict was ultimately initiated by the Greeks for the frivolous reason of punishing Troy for the abduction of Helen.<sup>10</sup> (With this also the Phoenicians agree, although they correct the part of the Persian story that indicts them: 1.5.1-2.)

What is wrong with this Persian interpretation of the heroic age? The gods are gone, and heroic characters have become not merely fully human (as in Thucydides' *Archaeology*), but downright ordinary. Herodotus' Persian intellectuals do not just reinterpret causes, as Thucydides does in his *Archaeology*; they string together in a continuous causal chain heroic-age events that no one had ever before represented as factually connected. This is a parody of super-secularized, super-rationalized mythology.<sup>11</sup> It does not constitute **(p. 199)** tradition or, much less, a work of *historiē*, but rather a mental game and a rhetorical feat. It is not just good clean fun, either, since the Persians (and the subsidiary Phoenicians) use it to score a political point: that the Greeks were the first aggressors against Asiatics, and not the other way around. From the point of view of the text, arguably one of the most important functions of Herodotus' proem is to illustrate how easy it is to be clever with something as fluid as myth

and use it as rhetoric.<sup>12</sup> Herodotus disagrees with the method as much as he disagrees with the results. He takes distance from this way of explaining history, even at the cost of putting aside the idea that the Trojan War (or the violation against Helen that led to it) represented the true beginning of the East-West conflict or a legitimate starting point for his *logos* (1.5.3).<sup>13</sup>

Yet, Herodotus mentions the Trojan War several other times in the rest of his work, and it is clear that he considers it an important landmark. It is not merely that various parties, like his Persian sources in the proem, use it as a charter myth either to justify retaliation (the Persians) or to bolster leadership claims (the Greeks).<sup>14</sup> Rather, the narrator himself brings it into his narrative of historical events. When he compares Xerxes' army in 480 BCE to the Achaean army that marched against Troy (7.20), the Trojan War emerges as a metaphorical counterpart of the Persian Wars. At the end of the *Histories* that heroic-age event even becomes something similar to what Herodotus (**p.200**) had denied it was in the proem (1.1–5): if not to the ultimate historical cause of the Persian Wars themselves, at least an event that is causally related to their outcome. The causality Herodotus here establishes is, unlike that of the proem, entirely transcendent and mysterious. The link between the mythical and the historical past is the hero Protesilaus, who was killed at the beginning of the Trojan War. Just as the Persians conceive of the Achaeans' attack against Troy as the beginning of the conflict that culminates in Xerxes' invasion of Greece, so Xerxes' governor Artayctes used it as a pretext for plundering Protesilaus' shrine (9.116). But Artayctes, as it turns out, is the last Persian individual who dies in the *Histories*, and his death, underlined by an omen, is explicitly envisioned as bringing rightful vengeance for the first Greek who died at Troy (9.120).<sup>15</sup>

The Trojan War also turns up in a very different passage (2.112–21) where we find no trace either of the numinous aura that pervades the end of the *Histories* or of the scepticism with which Herodotus treats the Persian rationalization in the proem. Here Herodotus rather subjects the poetic tradition to meticulous enquiry and reasons over the myth on the basis of factual evidence.<sup>16</sup> He shows that the event has something to teach us at the larger moral and, indeed, even theological levels (2.121).<sup>17</sup> But that teaching is rational and becomes entirely clear only after one has found out what really happened back then (2.121). And the reason why Herodotus expresses confidence that he can uncover the remote mythical past, this time, is that he can rely on his own autopsy and that trustworthy (Egyptian) sources are on hand, more truly learned (that is, more *logioi*) than the Persians of the proem as well as far more objective.<sup>18</sup>

In the face of these uses of the Trojan War myth in the *Histories*, we are obliged to acknowledge, if not entirely reconcile, three different principles that inform Herodotus' view of the heroic age. First, in the (**p.201**) heroic age, as in every age, one recovers factual truths only through *historiē* (as Herodotus does in

Book Two). This is not always possible, however, because (and this is the second point) the heroic age is remote and people keep adjusting the record for purposes of their own.<sup>19</sup> Third, the heroic age is also to a great extent unknowable because it is a mysterious time, subject to special rules: as such, it often lies beyond the competence of the *histōr*, who investigates and records *ta genomena ex anthrōpōn*, events of men.

We can verify the complexity of this aspect of Herodotus' thought if we examine his treatment of Minos, who is the heroic referent in the statement at 3.122 (quoted above, p. 196) that draws an explicit distinction between the human and not entirely human generations. In the *Histories* as a whole Minos plays a very small role and remains a rather colourless character. Even so, he manages to find his way into the *logos* in three different contexts—in Books One, Three, and Seven respectively. Herodotus, in other words, keeps going back to Minos, somewhat as he does to the much more important Trojan War. What makes Minos interesting, moreover, is that we know for a fact, and independently from Herodotus, that the Minos tradition had been shaped to reflect contemporary political realities. Minos is, therefore, a good illustration of the notion that myth, whether rationalized or not, could be used as a special language for the purposes of rhetoric and ideology.

The Minos tradition in the fifth century follows two overlapping storylines, both connected with a hegemonic discourse about Athenian sea power.<sup>20</sup> In one form of the myth, Minos is a character in the **(p.202)** fabulous legend of Theseus, with the Minotaur, Daedalus, and other characters in supporting roles.<sup>21</sup> Here he is the villain antagonist, defeated by the good hero Theseus, who, in the fifth-century Athenian tradition (though not elsewhere and definitely not in Herodotus),<sup>22</sup> will become the proto-founder of the Athenian *polis* and the embodiment of its virtues. The first elaboration of this story appears in a dithyramb of Bacchylides (17), which glorifies Theseus at the expense of the arrogant and lecherous Minos.<sup>23</sup> In the second, more prosaic, form of the fifth-century Minos tradition, there is no Theseus. Minos is more or less the sole protagonist as the archetypal ruler of the Aegean, less an opponent of fifth-century Athens than its implicit antecedent and analogue.<sup>24</sup> A radical representative of this way of looking at Minos is Thucydides, who discusses both Minos and Theseus as **(p.203)** political archetypes, but (like Herodotus) does not relate them to each other.<sup>25</sup>

Thucydides' *Archaeology* devotes to Minos two passages (1.4 and 1.8) that combined make the following points (I mostly paraphrase):

(a) Minos is the 'most ancient of those we know about through hearsay' (*palaiotatos hōn akoēi ismen*) who acquired a fleet; he dominated the Hellenic sea and through his children ruled the Cyclades, founding colonies in most of them (1.4).

(b) He did this after expelling the Carians (1.4), who, like the Phoenicians, were the early inhabitants of the islands and were given to piracy (1.8.1).

(c) Proof of this fact (i.e., presumably only of Carian presence in the islands, and not also of their piratical activities, but Thucydides' reasoning is not entirely clear; see below) is that half of the ancient tombs that the Athenians recently found in Delos are Carian. One can identify them as such from the equipment of weapons they contain and from comparison with modern Carian burials (1.8.1).

(d) Minos did his best to free the sea of pirates, no doubt (*hōs eikos*) in order to be able to collect revenues (*prosodous*, 1.4). His expulsion of the 'evildoers' (*kakourgoi*) made communications easier and life more settled, so that the populations of the coast began to pursue the acquisition of wealth and some built walls. The love of gain allowed the stronger to conquer the weaker and persuaded the weaker to accept the domination of the stronger (1.8.2-3).

This last, highly interpretative, passage reveals the political significance of the entire sequence. Thucydides' Minos is a progressive force; as the early analogue of contemporary Athens, he justifies the very existence and mission of the Athenian Empire.<sup>26</sup>

**(p.204)** At 1.4 (a), Thucydides' unique use of the phrase *palaiotatos hōn akoēi ismen* establishes an implicit connection with Herodotus because it joins together (without reproducing exactly) expressions of Herodotus' code of *historiē*. In particular, it echoes the *prōtos tōn hēmeis idmen* of Herodotus' Minos-Polycrates statement at 3.122.2, where Herodotus says that Polycrates was the first ruler of the Aegean we know about, aside from Minos. It also echoes another phrase, which, as we shall soon see, Herodotus uses precisely in a passage of Book One that discusses the same topic as Thucydides does, Minos' rule over the Carians (1.171.2). It is very tempting to surmise, as Hornblower does, that Thucydides is specifically reacting against Herodotus' treatment of Minos.<sup>27</sup> Thucydides disagrees with that treatment on two main points. The first is the idea that one should devalue the primacy of Minos' thalassocracy in favour of that of Polycrates, as Herodotus does at 3.122.1. Second, Thucydides objects to the way in which Herodotus elsewhere describes the relationship of the Carians to Minos.

Herodotus discusses the Carians and Minos in Book One, where he states, first of all, that the ancient Carians came to the region they now occupy in Asia Minor from the islands (1.171.2). So far Herodotus appears in line with the tradition followed by Thucydides, but he soon intervenes to veer in a different direction:

For in ancient times, when they were called Leleges, they inhabited the islands as subjects of Minos. As far back as I am able to reach through hearsay [*hoson kai egō dunatos eimi (epi) makrotaton exikesthai akoēi*],

they paid no tribute [*phoron*] to Minos; rather, they manned his ships when he needed them. (1.171.2)

The metanarrative intervention *hoson kai egō dunatos eimi (epi) makrotaton exikesthai akoēi* is what Thucydides appears to echo in (a) (1.4). But in Herodotus' context it represents a more specific expression of the author's research, indicating that this is one of those cases (**p.205**) in which he is capable of applying *historiē* to events of the heroic past. It is hard to know what sort of *akoē* Thucydides is talking about when he speaks about the Carians, but Herodotus, at least, is clearly not relying on the generalized poetic tradition but on *akoē* derived from local sources. We soon learn (1.171.5) that these sources are Cretan. It is to their report that Herodotus gives greatest prominence and at 1.171.2 he implies that they are most credible, even though he will also caution us (at 1.171.6) that the Carians themselves adduce physical proof of their native Asiatic origin—a version that does not involve Minos at all.<sup>28</sup>

Herodotus' strong marker of *historiē*, 'as far back as I am able to reach through hearsay', coupled with the negation ('The Carians paid no tribute to Minos'), also seems to signal implicit polemic.<sup>29</sup> But polemic against whom? If we believe that Thucydides' Minos passage comes after Herodotus, and even perhaps responds to Herodotus, then Herodotus, for his part, is perhaps objecting to the *sort of thing* that Thucydides does especially well but that others had also done before him: the practice of embracing and enhancing the contemporary Minos tradition in order to legitimize Athenian sea power in opposition to its subjects or enemies.<sup>30</sup> Herodotus refashions this discourse. The Carians were not evil pirates (*lēistai, kakourgoi*) whom Minos did well to expel for the sake of everyone's security, as Thucydides says (1.8.2, point (d) above).<sup>31</sup> They were, it is true, subjects of Minos: Herodotus' representation leaves in place the tradition of a Minoan thalassocracy such as we find in Thucydides (**p.206**) and elsewhere. But, even if we accept the assumption (cf. *hōs eikos* in Thuc. 1.4) that Minos, like fifth-century Athens, had imperial revenues (Thucydides' *prosodous* at 1.4) that included tribute (*phoros*), in Herodotus the Carians are rather comparable to the most privileged among the Ionian allies in the Athenian League, who provided ships rather than money (cf. Thuc. 1.96.1, 99.3).<sup>32</sup>

Herodotus' Minos passage is part of his ethnographic insertion that describes Carians, Caunians, and Lycians. Minos is not the protagonist here and rather comes into the narrative for the greater glory of the Carians: 'Since indeed Minos conquered much land and was successful in war, the Carians were by far the most famous people [*logimōtaton ethnos*] of all the peoples of that time' (1.171.3). Minos' empire provides the historical context in which the Carians distinguished themselves both in a military and in a cultural sense. As Herodotus interjects at this point, the Carians even invented items of military equipment that the Greeks adopted as their own (1.171.4).<sup>33</sup> This view of Carian resourcefulness and of a debt of Greeks to non-Greeks<sup>34</sup> does not, once again,

seem to sit well with Thucydides. On the contrary, the archaeological proof he rather illogically deploys at 1.8.1 (point *(c)* summarized above) emphasizes precisely the armour as a major token of the past and present difference between Carians and Greeks.<sup>35</sup>

The next point of disagreement has to do with the time and circumstances of the Carians' resettlement to Asia. For Thucydides it was Minos who expelled them from islands (1.8.1, point *(b)* above). For Herodotus they remained there until the arrival of Ionians and Dorians at the end of the heroic age (1.171.5).<sup>36</sup> In **(p. 207)** comparison to Thucydides' schematic picture of the ancient Aegean, Herodotus displays a more specialized sort of knowledge. It was not the Carians, but the Lycians (then named Termilae) who moved from the islands to Asia at the time of Minos. They did so in the following of Minos' brother Sarpedon, who had been expelled by Minos as the result of a dispute over the kingship (1.173.2). In so far as Herodotus is here talking about Cretan settlements abroad, he may reflect a tradition similar to that which motivates Thucydides' statement that Minos through his children ruled the Cyclades, founding colonies in many of them (1.4, point *(a)*).<sup>37</sup> But Thucydides' Minos, once again, is in control on the model of Athens: 'ruling through his children' recalls the well-known practice of the Pisistratids of putting their family members in positions of power.<sup>38</sup> For Herodotus, by contrast, Minos is merely an indirect cause of the Lycians' resettlement. Other factors intervene to shape this people's identity, as the cast of characters expands to include heroic age Athenians. The Termilae moved to Asia under the leadership of Sarpedon and changed their name to Lycians from the Athenian Lycus, who joined their colony after his brother, Aegeus, expelled him from Athens (1.173.3).

**(p.208)** Since Aegeus is famously Theseus' father, here the Minos family brushes against the Theseus family.<sup>39</sup> Herodotus has, however, no interest in linking the two and leaves them to act independently through parallel pairs of quarrelling brothers. His focus is firmly on the Lycians, as it was just above on the Carians. The age of Minos is first and foremost a crucial time when peoples, non-Greeks and Greeks, move about, mix together, and acquire certain cultural traits. If ideological bias is inevitable in anyone's use of myth, two distinct Herodotean brands may be detected here. On the one hand, Herodotus uses the heroic age to discredit its exploitation by a political discourse of hegemony (Persian or Athenian, as the case may be). At the same time he evidently finds in myth facts that corroborate his own *philobarbaros* ideology or that help him to blur the distinction between Greeks and non-Greeks.<sup>40</sup>

In these chapters in Book One, Minos' actions resemble those of a regular agent of human history, albeit from an ancient time (see *to...palaion*, 1.171.2). In Book Seven, however, Herodotus must confront a more baffling picture, where the Minos saga with its most complicated background even briefly meets the Trojan War saga. The passage is a small sampler of features whose diversity confirms



both Herodotus' caution in dealing with the heroic age and his continuing interest in it.

Minos enters the main narrative of Book Seven in the words of a Delphic oracle that persuaded the Cretans to decline the invitation from the confederate Greeks that they join the resistance against Xerxes in 480 BCE. On that occasion, the Pythia warned the Cretans that, if they did help the Greeks, Minos (of all people) might be angry with them again, as he had been for their participation in the Trojan War (of all things):

**(p.209)** 'Foolish men! You are not content with all the tears that Minos already sent you, when he was angry at you for helping Menelaus, because the Greeks did not help to avenge his own death at Camicus, while you Cretans helped them to avenge the abduction of a Spartan woman by a non-Greek?' (7.169.2)

Some explanation for this strange oracle is clearly in order, and the narrator begins with the Pythia's reference to Minos' death in Sicily. By mentioning that he had allegedly gone there in pursuit of Daedalus, Herodotus potentially ties Minos to the Minotaur tradition, but (as at 1.173.3) he remains elliptical on this point and moves on.<sup>41</sup> What really interests him is what happens to the Cretans. Urged by a god, they made an expedition *en masse* against Sicily to avenge Minos' death, but, after failing to capture the Sicilian city of Camicus, they decided to abandon the enterprise. During their journey home, a storm drove them ashore in southern Italy, and there they settled permanently, 'becoming Messapians of Iapygia instead of Cretans' (7.170.1-2). At this point Herodotus follows up on the later history of these Messapians of Iapygia (7.170.3-4). He goes on so long on this topic that he ends up apologizing for the digression, which he calls a *parenthēkē* (7.171.1).<sup>42</sup>

Herodotus then returns to the consequences of Minos' death on Crete, so severe and long lasting that they affected Cretan policy in the Persian Wars. The expedition the Cretans made to avenge the death of Minos, first of all, left the island almost empty of inhabitants. Other ethnic groups came to colonize it, especially Greeks, and two generations later the Cretans participated in the Trojan War. Angry at the Cretans' readiness to support Menelaus and their corresponding failure to avenge his own death, Minos struck the island with starvation and disease, depopulating it for a second time. This calamity represents the 'tears of Minos' in the Pythia's warning to the Cretans at the time of Xerxes' invasion that they should not support the confederate Greeks (7.171.1-2; cf. 7.169).

**(p.210)** It is hard to make sense of this sequence, both from the point of view of its narrative structure and from that of the mutual relations it establishes among different events. A great portion of the insertion (7.170.2-4) is about a

new nation in the West (the Iapygians of Messapia): this is consistent with the interest in collectivities that Herodotus displays in the Minos chapters of Book One on the origins of Carians and Lycians. For at least certain Cretan facts Herodotus identifies his sources: they are the Praesians (7.171.1). These were, according to Herodotus, one of the only two groups who stayed behind at the time of the expedition to Sicily to avenge Minos (7.170.1), so that we may infer that they were Eteo-Cretans, belonging to the original non-Greek population of Crete. Since the Praesians have remained in Crete from the time of Minos through the entire history of their island, they would have been uniquely qualified to provide the *akoē* that allows Herodotus to 'go as far back as possible' in time, as he says in Book One (1.171.2). They are likely, in fact, to be those very same Cretans who there maintain that the Carians came from Crete, a version that Herodotus, as we have seen, prefers to that of the Carians about their own origin (1.171.5–6; above, p. 205). Somewhat as in the case of the Egyptian sources for the Trojan War, their long historical memory makes the heroic age accessible to Herodotus' *historiē*.

So far, so good. But what sort of information have these Cretans communicated to Herodotus? Perhaps the long *parenthēkē* about the Iapygians of Messapia, which could not derive from the reports of the Cretans back home, represents a narratological symptom of Herodotus' discomfort with what he has learned from them concerning the Delphic oracle, Minos, the vicissitudes of their island, and the Cretan response to the Greeks seeking help. The Cretans' story, in fact, collapses different chronological moments of the heroic period and spills into the present on the basis of a causality that defies rational enquiry—rational in either a factual or an ethical sense. It establishes an unprecedented relation between the death of Minos in Sicily and the Trojan War, somewhat as the Persians in the proem had connected the abductions of Io, Europa, and Medea to one another and to the Trojan War. This time, however, the connection—not only reported by sources that have almost the status of eyewitnesses, but also apparently validated by the Pythia—has the chance of being real. The disasters in Crete and the changes of population in the island are the results of the demands of a dead Minos, who bridges the heroic and **(p.211)** the historical ages, competes with Menelaus in dragging communities into an aggressive war, keeps the Cretans of recent history tied to their barbarian past, and prevents them from participating in the Greek defensive war against the Persians. An account less compatible with Herodotus' overarching view of the workings of history and the divine is hard to imagine.

Are the Cretans liars? Is the disastrous Minos oracle not authentic? The syntax of the passage gives no indication of whether the oracle was merely reported by the Cretans or whether it constituted an actual event vouched for by the narrator Herodotus.<sup>43</sup> If we are to believe that the Cretans really received such an oracle, could the Cretans not have circumvented it, as the Athenians did with similarly negative Delphic responses to the great benefit of Greece (7.139–43)?

In the surrounding narratives in Book Seven Herodotus, after displaying the Athenian *exemplum*, proceeds to give his audiences a great deal of guidance on how to interpret the true motives behind the fictitious reasons—supported or not by oracular utterances, supported or not by appeals to the heroic age—which other medizing Greeks adduced in order to avoid joining the resistance against the Persians. But in the case of the Cretans he neither helps us understand their explanation nor does he give us permission to disbelieve it.<sup>44</sup> Herodotus knows full well that political manipulations of the heroic age are common in foreign diplomacy, but he also knows that the heroic age is not exactly like the historical age. Minos, like Protesilaus, Orestes, and Talthybius, is not fully or simply a member of the human race. *Historiē* cannot in this case either avoid or solve the impasse of the entanglement of present and remote past.

With the scandals of this narrative in mind, we can briefly return to the Minos statement at 3.122, with which we began. Here Herodotus flags a context where he regards the separation between the heroic and the historical age as not merely possible but mandatory:

**(p.212)** Polycrates wanted to rule the sea [*thalassokrateein*] and was the first among the Greeks to do so, as far as we know [*prōtos...tōn hēmeis idmen*], aside from [*parex*] Minos of Cnossus or anyone who may have gained control of the sea earlier than Minos; but of the so-called human race [*tēs...legomenēs anthrōpēiēs geneēs*] Polycrates was the first, having great hopes of ruling both Ionia and the islands. (3.122.2)

In his enquiry on the origins of peoples, as we have seen, Herodotus has never contested the notion of Minos' thalassocracy.<sup>45</sup> But, in the narrative of Polycrates, he chooses to introduce that information in passing only to set it aside, with a rhetorical move that communicates disapproval of the political uses of myth. It cannot be a coincidence that in one version of the Minos tradition (the one that notably appears in the already-mentioned dithyramb 17 of Bacchylides), the symbol of Minos' rule is a ring in the sea, just as in Herodotus the good fortune of Polycrates is metonymically connected to a ring the tyrant throws into the sea.<sup>46</sup> Herodotus, in other words, encourages the parallel between Minos and Polycrates, but he does so for the sake of substituting Polycrates for Minos in the implicit parallel involving the Athens of his times. What Herodotus is saying is this: we do not need the heroic age, *in this case*, either to do history or to talk politics. The recent and fully human tyrant of Samos, whose story comes complete with a rise and a much emphasized, heartbreaking, downfall (3.125), provides a more useful paradigm for present realities than Minos.<sup>47</sup> Herodotus here follows very much the same principle that he goes out of his way to demonstrate in the proem of the *Histories*, when he points out that Croesus is a better-documented antecedent of recent events than the Trojan War.

Notes:

(<sup>1</sup>) Herodotus would call these simply *logoi*. The Greek word *muthos*, like the modern ‘myth’, is capable of denoting a much broader range of narratives, and Herodotus uses it only at 2.23 and 2.45, both times in reference to invented tales (see the Introduction to this volume, pp. 11–13). But, in spite of the lack of a Greek term that denotes specifically heroic traditions, Greek thought often implies a separation between the age of heroes and the age of men. The return of the Heraclids to the Peloponnese marks the transition between the two, which is presumably why Ephorus, for example, begins his universal history from this point (*FGrH* 70, F. 8 = D.S. 4.1.2). See Vidal-Naquet (1960), Wardman (1960: 408), and Veyne (1988: 51), and also Drews (1973: 11). On the question of whether Herodotus differentiates between a *spatium mythicum* and a *spatium historicum*, see, in this volume, the Introduction, pp. 23–6, and Saïd, Ch. 2, pp. 88–90. Other contributions to the volume employ broader definitions of ‘myth’ and ‘mythical’.

(<sup>2</sup>) It was more likely that a thinker would express scepticism about the gods than about the historical existence of Agamemnon or Heracles: Veyne (1988: 40).

(<sup>3</sup>) Thucydides expresses reservations about our ability to reconstruct all but contemporary events (1.20); he does not explicitly recognize a separation between the heroic age and the historical past down to the Persian Wars (cf. above, n. 1).

(<sup>4</sup>) For the translation of the phrase *tēs...legomenēs anthrōpēiēs geneēs*, see Williams (2001: 4). Cf. Lateiner (1989: 118) (‘ordinary human history’), and the Introduction to this volume, p. 23. This passage, as well as the sections in Herodotus Book One about Minos, have recently been analysed by E. Irwin (2007a) in an article with which I often find myself in agreement, as subsequent references will show.

(<sup>5</sup>) Herodotus’ attitude towards heroes is, as we shall see, uneven, but with regard to Orestes and other Peloponnesian figures especially he appears to agree with public opinion in Sparta in the sixth and fifth centuries BCE; see Boedeker (1993: esp. 166). For heroes’ contacts with divinities, see, e.g., 4.179, where Herodotus reports a tradition that represents Jason in conversation with Triton. The Dioscuri are identified both as gods (2.43, 2.50) and as heroes (e.g., 4.145, 9.73). Helen is called a *theos* (6.61) and so is Protesilaus (9.120.3). On heroes in Herodotus, see Vandiver (1991).

(<sup>6</sup>) On the indeterminacy of Herodotus’ outlook on the heroic past, see Williams (2001: 5–7), criticizing Vidal-Naquet (1960). Feeney (2007a: 73–6) provides an illuminating discussion of this complex issue. The fact that Herodotus assigns Minos at 3.122.2 to a *race* (*geneē*) different from the human is no doubt a

reference to his being son of Zeus, but Herodotus does not mention this. In the case of Perseus, Herodotus implies, but declines to discuss his divine parentage at 6.53, although he explicitly mentions it at 7.61.

(<sup>7</sup>) Cf. Dewald's discussion, Ch. 1, §2, of the genealogical and aetiological mythic material in Book One. On other ways in which heroic myths reverberate into later events, see, in this volume, Saïd, Ch. 2, and Baragwanath, Ch. 12.

(<sup>8</sup>) It is only in a more global sense, then, that 'Thucydides seems to handle mythic material with less scepticism than Herodotus usually does' (Luraghi 2000: 234). For Herodotus, *akoē* is, of course, joined with *historiē*, 'investigation', and *gnōmē*, 'judgement': all three elements, explicitly invoked at 2.99.1, are operative, for example, in Herodotus' reconstruction of the Trojan War scenario at 2.112–20 and many other times in the *Histories*. Here, however, I want especially to emphasize the confidence that Herodotus occasionally displays in the first of these: information obtained through oral report from especially qualified sources.

(<sup>9</sup>) On the intellectual appeal of Thucydides' *Archaeology*, see esp. de Romilly (1956, 1966).

(<sup>10</sup>) The *analogy* between the Trojan War and the Persian Wars has already emerged in Simonides' historical elegy on the battle of Plataea (fr. 11 West), probably dating to 479 BCE. See Boedeker (2001). The notion of a *causal relation* between Trojan and Persian wars may be a natural outgrowth of the analogical argument, but it appears explicitly for the first time in Herodotus, as far as I know.

(<sup>11</sup>) The parody could be only Herodotus': see Drews (1973: 88–90). But Herodotus' sophisticated Persian friends might be here having some fun with Greek myths as well, while at the same time driving their point home. For an excellent formulation of the perspective from which we should look at Herodotus' proem, see R. L. Fowler (1996: 82–6). See also Goldhill (2002: 13–15).

(<sup>12</sup>) Cf. Dewald (1999: 233–7).

(<sup>13</sup>) Saïd, Ch. 2, pp. 102–5, argues that these introductory stories contain the seeds of motifs that become important in later episodes. Cf. also Dewald, Ch. 1, p. 62: they reveal Herodotus belief that 'we can neither completely trust stories that claim to be authoritative accounts of the distant past nor do entirely without them in making sense of our collective human heritage.'

(<sup>14</sup>) On the Greek side, the Spartans and the Athenians at Syracuse base their claims to leadership of the Greeks on Homeric passages (7.59 and 161). The Athenians on the battlefield of Plataea justify their higher rank on the basis of

the role they played in the Trojan War, though they reject this approach to the past halfway through their speech (9.27.4–5), along similar lines to Herodotus himself at the end of the proem (1.5.3–4), although far more dishonestly; the parallel has been noticed by Flower and Marincola (2002: 156). On the Persian side, Xerxes visits the plain of Troy on his way to Greece, as if his expedition were an act of retaliation for that heroic war (7.43), which is how the Persian Artayctes uses the Trojan War myth (9.116; see below). Baragwanath, this volume, Ch. 12, considers Mardonius' (and Xerxes') appropriation of the Trojan War myth.

(<sup>15</sup>) On Protesilaus and the end of the *Histories*, see esp. Boedeker (1988), and, in this volume, Saïd, Ch. 2, p. 100, and Bowie, Ch. 11, pp. 273–4. For the Trojan War narratives as book ends to the work, see Ayo (1984).

(<sup>16</sup>) See, in this volume, de Bakker, Ch. 3, §4, and de Jong, Ch. 4, p. 137.

(<sup>17</sup>) As de Bakker, Ch. 3, §3, and Vandiver, Ch. 5, §1, point out in different ways in this volume.

(<sup>18</sup>) For Herodotus' autopsy of the temple of Foreign Aphrodite, which he interprets as a shrine to Helen, see 2.112.2. For the Egyptians as *logioi*, see 2.3.1, 2.77.1; cf. 1.1.1 of the Persians.

(<sup>19</sup>) This is true not only of politically motivated re-tellers of traditions, like Herodotus' Persian sources in the proem or the parties mentioned above, n. 14, but also, for example, of Homer, who chooses a version of the Trojan War events on the grounds that it was 'suitable to an epic poem' (2.116). Neville (1977: 3) observes that Herodotus' criticism of Homer on this occasion shows his awareness that historiography's aims are different from those of poetry. See further the Introduction to this volume, pp. 29–31. For Herodotus' presentation of the use of myth for rhetorical purposes by his characters, see, in this volume, Saïd, Ch. 2, §3, and Baragwanath, Ch. 12.

(<sup>20</sup>) For the Athenian discourse on sea power, see Momigliano (1944). The historicity of the myth of Minoan thalassocracy is examined by Starr (1954), who regards it purely as a product of Periclean thought, lacking any historical foundation; *contra* Cassola (1957b), who acknowledges the political uses of the tradition in the fifth century, but also argues that its nucleus preserves the memory of the dominance of pre-Greek Crete in the Middle Minoan period (2000–c.1600 BCE), before the Mycenaean conquest. For a more current state of the question, see Hägg and Marinatos (1984). For the purposes of this chapter, the historicity of the myth from a modern viewpoint does not matter. It seems clear, at any rate, that the myth originated earlier than, and independently from, the political purposes to which it was adapted.

(<sup>21</sup>) The first reference to Minos' wife bearing the Minotaur occurs in Hesiod's *Ehoiai* (fr. 145 MW) and the first extant reference to Theseus' killing of the monster is in Sappho (fr. 206 LP). Cf. also below, p. 208 and n. 39, for other elements in the Minos and Theseus saga.

(<sup>22</sup>) The one time Theseus appears in Herodotus (9.73), he is the abductor of Helen who put Attica in danger: see, in this volume, Saïd, Ch. 2, p. 99, and Baragwanath, Ch. 12, §2. Herodotus does not guarantee this story, but he attributes it to an Athenian tradition. If this is accurate, the tradition must be older than the Theseus myth as refashioned at Athens in the fifth century. Walker (1995: 15) observes that, in the works of early archaic artists and writers, Theseus appears as 'something of a bandit'.

(<sup>23</sup>) Van Oeveren (1999) argues that Bacchylides 17 was designed for performance at the Delian Festival shortly after 478 BCE and amounts to a charter myth for the newly founded Delian League; cf. Giesekam (1976). On the contrast between the two protagonists of this ode and its political significance, see esp. Segal (1979). On Theseus versus Minos, there must have been other fifth-century texts now lost: in the pseudo-Platonic dialogue *Minos* (320e–321b) the Socrates character mentions a long Athenian tradition of tragedies that blackened the character of Minos (cf. Plutarch, *Theseus* 16.7–9); he claims that these negative portrayals are unfair, born of a popular desire to punish Minos for the tribute he imposed on Athens. Strabo 10.4.7/C476–7 discusses the ambivalence of the tradition about Minos (excellent legislator or tyrant). Other sources referring to the Minos–Theseus myth include Plato, *Leg.* 706 a–b; Apoll. *Bibl.* 3.15.7, *Epit.* 1.7–9; Plut. *Thes.* 15–22 gives several different versions.

(<sup>24</sup>) Homer mentions Minos without referring to his mastery of the sea in the *Iliad* (14.321–22) and, as judge in the underworld, in the *Odyssey* (11.568–71), but Hesiod's *Ehoiai* emphasizes his power (fr. 140 MW). References to Minos' thalassocracy outside of Herodotus and Thucydides (in addition to those in the Theseus versions mentioned above) are all late: Aristotle, *Pol.* 2.7.2–4 = 1271<sup>b</sup>; Apoll. *Bibl.* 3.9, 210; D.S. 4.60.3; Strabo 1.3.2/C 48, 10.4.8/C 476; Paus. 1.27.9; Schol. Flor. in Callim. fr. 4 Pf. 1.23–26 (p. 13).

(<sup>25</sup>) For Theseus in Thucydides, see 2.15.1–6. In Herodotus, Theseus is a contemporary of Helen at 9.73 (cf. above, n. 22), while Minos dies three generations before the Trojan War (7.171.1); Herodotus does not even make the two overlap chronologically. In the light of the shared knowledge of the Minos–Theseus legend, however, Herodotus' treatment of Theseus in this passage (including the Helen–Trojan War connection) would deserve further study. On the comparative analysis of the treatment of Minos in Herodotus and Thucydides, see most recently E. Irwin (2007a).

(<sup>26</sup>) Cf. de Romilly (1966: esp. 163). On Minos in Thucydides, see also Kallet (2001: 25–6, 198–9). E. Irwin (2007a: 196–205) discusses in detail the political resonances of Thucydides' Minos.

(<sup>27</sup>) See Hornblower (1991: *ad* 1.4 (pp. 19–20)) and E. Irwin (2007a: 205; cf. 190–4). Thucydides' combination *akoēi ismen* ('we know by hearsay') is *not* Herodotean, as E. Irwin (2007a: 212) rightly shows. At the same time the individual components of the phrase signal Thucydides' reference to Herodotus. Similarly *eidōs...akoēi* at 6.55.1, occurring as it does in reference to a non-contemporary event treated by Herodotus, may again constitute an allusion. Of course, we should also keep in mind that, as Luraghi (2000: 235) reminds us, much of the material Thucydides reflects or alludes to is lost to us.

(<sup>28</sup>) On the discrepancy of the two traditions at 1.171.5–6, see below, n. 36. For the Cretan sources at 7.171.1, see below, p. 210. The Carian myth of autochthony is obviously more nationalistic, and the physical proof the Carians adduce in its support is the ancient sanctuary of Zeus at Mylasa (1.171.6); Herodotus here says that the Carians share this sanctuary with Mysians and Lydians on the basis of their alleged kinship with these two peoples, but exclude other ethnic groups, even if they speak their same language. Just below (1.172) Herodotus even more clearly casts doubt on a people's version of its own origin in the case of the Caunians.

(<sup>29</sup>) Giuffrida (1976: 137).

(<sup>30</sup>) Luraghi's argument (2000: 235) about the range of contemporary texts and discourses to which we no longer have access, especially as they relate to Thucydides' *Archaeology*, is again relevant here; cf. above, n. 23 end.

(<sup>31</sup>) For the possible equivalence of *prosodoi* and *phoros*, see E. Irwin (2007a: 198 and n. 3). Herodotus elsewhere talks about later Carians and Ionians sailing the seas *kata lēiēn* (2.152.4). Thucydides' representation of the early Carians as Aegean pirates is echoed only by Philochorus *FGrH* 328, F. 94, who mentions a Carian raid to Attica in the time of Cecrops.

(<sup>32</sup>) Or the equivalent of the *original members* of the Delian League, as E. Irwin (2007a: 206) suggests.

(<sup>33</sup>) Strabo (14.2.27) confirms Herodotus, and cites verses of Alcaeus and Anacreon about Greek military equipment being called 'Carian' in the sixth century. Herodotus, for his part, confirms his own earlier account when he says (7.71) that the Carians of Xerxes' army marching against Greece were equipped in the same way as the Greeks.

(<sup>34</sup>) On Greek indebtedness to non-Greeks, especially Egyptians, see, in this volume, de Bakker, Ch. 3, Vandiver, Ch. 5, and Gray, Ch. 6.



<sup>(35)</sup> On the logical inconsistency of this archaeological proof, see E. Irwin (2007a: 208–10). Its purely rhetorical value recalls Thucydides' seeming evaluation of Greek troops that marched to Troy at 1.10.3–5 on the basis of a calculation that, if actually carried out, leads to opposite conclusions; see Luraghi (2000: 229–30).

<sup>(36)</sup> For various traditions on the whereabouts of the Carians, see Cassola (1957a) and Giuffrida (1976: 140–5). Herodotus says that the Carians claim to be autochthonous while the Cretans say they are from the islands (1.171.5–6); on the discrepancy between the two traditions, see Cassola (1957a: 203). In the *Iliad* they are Trojan allies already living in Asia (2.867, 10.428). Thucydides (alone among ancient sources) has them settle there in the time of Minos. Isocrates (*Panathenaicus* 12.42.2–43) says that the Carians occupied the islands after Minos and held them until the Athenians and the Ionians (but not the Dorians) drove them out. Isocrates' version represents a further re-elaboration, serving the purposes of a fourth-century ideological discourse about the Greek fight against barbarians. Diodorus places the Carians in Naxos before Theseus and Ariadne (5.51.3); like Isocrates, he talks about a thalassocracy of the Carians (5.84), who, after the Trojan War, appropriated the Cyclades having expelled the Cretans after the Cretan diaspora led by Rhadamanthus (brother of Minos); the Carians were in turn eventually expelled by the Hellenes. The notion of a Carian thalassocracy must not have originated until the fourth century.

<sup>(37)</sup> Aristotle, *Pol.* 2.7.2–4 = 1271<sup>b</sup> agrees with Thucydides, but most other authors follow Herodotus in representing Minos' relatives, rather than Minos himself, as colonists; we cannot know whether this was the original tradition, which Thucydides has transformed. In a passage that partially agrees with Herodotus, Strabo says that Sarpedon and the Cretans founded Miletus and settled the Termilae in the country now called Lycia (12.8.5). Besides Herodotus, Strabo's source here appears to be Xanthus, *FGrH* 765, F. 15. Diodorus (5.64–80 and 84) assigns the role of colonists 'in the islands facing Ionia and Caria' to another brother of Minos, Rhadamanthus, and his sons (cf. above, n. 36). See also D.S. 4.79.1–2, Paus. 7.2.3 and 1.35.5.

<sup>(38)</sup> Cf. Hornblower (1991: *ad* 1.4 (pp. 20–1)).

<sup>(39)</sup> Cf. above, p. 202. The tradition of Aegeus' background and his connection to Minos is reported by Apollodorus, *Bibl.* 3.15.5–8. Pandion, son of Cecrops and his successor as king of Athens, was expelled by the sons of his brother Metion and went to Megara. After his death, his four sons (Aegeus, Pallas, Nisus, and Lycus) went back to Athens and reclaimed the power, which went to the oldest son, Aegeus, who eventually became the father of Theseus. Aegeus caused the death of Minos' son Androgeus. As a consequence, Minos attacked Athens with his

fleet and captured Megara. The Athenians agreed to give Minos satisfaction by sending fourteen children for the Minotaur.

(<sup>40</sup>) On this aspect of Herodotus' thought, see Pelling (1997b) and Munson (2001: 100–33). For Herodotus *philobarbaros*, see Plutarch, *De malign. Herod.* = *Mor.* 857A.

(<sup>41</sup>) 7.169.2. Aristotle, *Pol.* 2.7.2–4 = 1271<sup>b</sup> simply says that Minos went to Sicily on a military expedition after gaining dominance of the seas.

(<sup>42</sup>) Herodotus' statement that by 'becoming Messapians of Iapygia instead of Cretans' colonists also became 'mainlanders instead of islanders' (7.170.2) is relevant in the context of an ideological discourse on thalassocracy. See Munson (2006: 265–7) on the meaning and purposes of this digression, which causes the narrative to reach forward to the year 473 BCE. A fascinating political explanation of a different sort is provided by E. Irwin (2007a: 220–1).

(<sup>43</sup>) Cf. Dewald, Ch. 1, pp. 76–8, on the role of oracles in Book One. Herodotus in general does not argue against their contents.

(<sup>44</sup>) See Herodotus' narrative of the responses of the Argives (7.148–152), Gelon (7.157–65), and the Corcyreans (7.168), the first two of which include diplomatic references to heroic age events (7.150 and 160–1). Vannicelli (2004: 202–3) agrees on independent grounds that the episode of the embassy to Crete is anomalous with respect to the remaining three. On Herodotus' treatment of those controversial encounters, see Munson (2001: 217–30), Baragwanath (2008: 210–27), and Bowie, this volume, Ch. 11, §2.1.

(<sup>45</sup>) See 1.171.2; above, pp. 204–6.

(<sup>46</sup>) A portion of the story of Theseus' recovery of the ring of Minos was also represented in the painting by Mycon of the Athenian Theseion, according to Pausanias 1.17.2–3. See Castriota (1992: 58–63).

(<sup>47</sup>) E. Irwin (2007a: 216–18), who arrives at more or less similar conclusions, argues that Thucydides, for his part, deliberately minimizes the role of Polycrates in his history of thalassocracies so as not to detract from the achievements of Minos/Athens.

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