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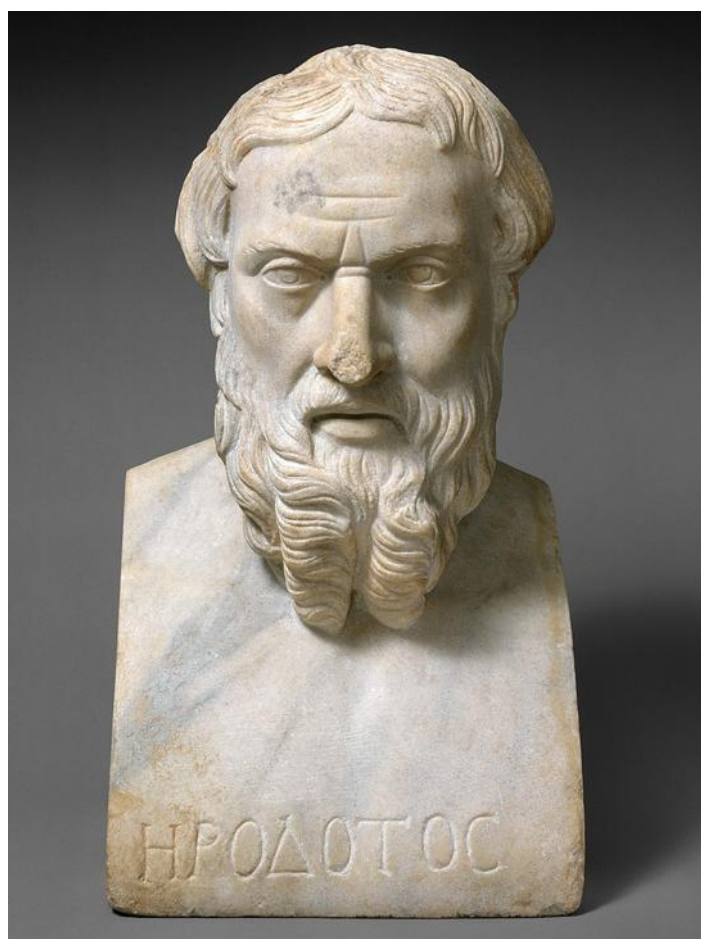
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GEOPOLITICS IN HERODOTUS

CONTINENTAL EMPIRES AND THE LIMITS OF EXPANSION



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Father of History, starting point of Geopolitics

Geopolitics as a discipline was established in the late 19th century and early 20th century. Although its systemic concepts and terminology are modern, its essential ideas and concepts are much older. Herodotus is the starting point of Geopolitics. Ancient Greek historian Herodotus (ca. 484-425 BC) from Halicarnassus, a coastal city of Asia Minor, is known as the 'father of History' (*pater historiae*) by Roman orator Cicero; he was also the first author of the Western canon that delves into the relation of space and power.¹ Herodotus offers an analysis on the relation of power and geography and insights related to the disciplines of Ethnography and Culture Studies.² Herodotus does not limit his perspective into a simple narrative of events; he examines also the genesis, establishment and the limits of empire formation. In his *Histories*, a multilevel narrative in nine books, Herodotus recounts the rise and the expansion of the Persian Empire and its clash with the Hellenic world of autonomous city-states during the Persian Wars (490-479 BC). This epic battle determined the fate of the Western civilization.

In the greater context of ancient Greek Geography, Herodotus belongs to the Ionian tradition of geographical and ethnographic discourse. Hecateus from Miletus (ca. 550-475 BC), author of the work *Description of the world* (*Περίοδος γῆς*) ranks among his forerunners. Herodotus' work clearly supersedes in quality his forebears with its depth, synthesis, and original new concepts. In Herodotus' work, one can find the first hermeneutical model of the rise and fall of great powers; the first systematic ethnographic depiction of a vast empire; the first preliminary analysis on the relation between geography and strategy; the first model of a 'clash of civilizations'; and the first definition of national identity. In the work of Herodotus, one can also find the first use of the term 'Atlantic Ocean' (I 202), the first mention of using maps for strategy (V 49) and the notion of a global empire where the sun does not set (VII 8c) which was later used by the Spanish and the British Empire. Herodotus' observations derive from his life experience and perception of living in a focal period, after the end of the Persian Wars. Herodotus' perspective draws also from his extensive travels in the Persian

¹ J. Romm, *Herodotus*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998· E.J. Bakker et al (eds), *Brill's Companion to Herodotus*, Leiden: Brill, 2002· C. Dewald & J. Marincola (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Herodotus*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

² R. Thomas, *Herodotus in Context: Ethnography, Science and the Art of Persuasion*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Empire and beyond, from Egypt to Mesopotamia, Phoenicia (modern Lebanon) and Scythia (modern Ukraine).

Herodotus was born in 484 BC in the Ionian city of Halicarnassus, at the western coastal part of Asia Minor. Having been born shortly after the failure of the Ionian Revolt (499-494 BC), Herodotus was actually a citizen of the Persian Empire, since his native city was lying under Persian control. He belonged to an aristocrat family of mixed Greek and Carian ancestry. Being a member of an aristocrat family, Herodotus has received military training. He took part in the failed armed revolt against the tyrant of Halicarnassus (460-454 BC) Lygdamis and had to flee the city as a result.³ Herodotus lived for a long period in Athens during its peak of power. In 443 BC, he participated in the military corps of settlers that created the colony of Thurii in Magna Graecia, in modern Calabria of southern Italy. He probably returned to continental Helladic region and was present in Athens by 430 BC, having witnessed the start of the Peloponnesian War (431-404 BC). He may have died in Athens during the plague or in Macedonia or according to another theory back in Thurii.

Besides his research with numerous travels in the territory of the Persian Empire and beyond, Herodotus was deeply knowledgeable about the geophysical, climate, and terrain data of Greece and other regions,⁴ of the topography and of military tactics of Greeks and Persians at land and sea.⁵ The importance of the sea power of the Greek world as opposed to the land power of the Persian Empire and of the maritime ascendancy of Athens is emphasized in various instances in Herodotus' *Histories*.⁶ His work offers a research into the relation of power and space, imperial goals and the limits of expansion set by geography and culture. Herodotus' work is based on elaborate narrative techniques; still a clear geopolitical reasoning underlies its essential outline: the creation of a land empire and the limits of its expansion. With his description of the rise of the Persian Empire after the conquest of the Medes, the Lydians, the Babylonians and the Egyptians, Herodotus the model of a continental logic of imperial expansion that transformed Western Asia and would become a model for later land empires. The Persian Empire would be the model for its very destroyer, Alexander

³ T.S. Brown, 'Early Life of Herodotus', *Ancient World* 17 (1988), 3-15· L. Tritle, 'Warfare in Herodotus', in: C. Dewald & J. Marincola (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Herodotus*, 209-210.

⁴ J. Romm, 'Herodotus and the Natural World', in: C. Dewald & J. Marincola (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Herodotus*, 178-191.

⁵ A. Ferril, 'Herodotus and the Strategy and Tactics of the Invasion of Xerxes', *American Historical Review* 72:1 (10/1966), 102-115· J.Z. van Rookhuijzen, *Herodotus and the Topography of Xerxes' Invasion*, Berlin: de Gruyter, 2019.

⁶ A. Momigliano, 'Sea-Power in Greek Thought', *Classical Review* 58 (1944), 1-7.

the Great (356-323 BC), who supplanted Persian with Greek rule, and indirectly for later Eurasian imperial polities.

On a macro-historical level, the Persian Wars can be viewed as an early manifestation of Eurasian geopolitical pressure along the East-West axis that has appeared in different forms in the *longue durée*; in the: Arab invasions of the 7th and 8th century, in the Turkish invasions in Asia Minor since the 11th century, in the Mongol expansion in the 13th century, in the Soviet attempts to unite Eurasia in the 20th century until the ambitious projects of today.⁷

The Persian Empire as a model of land power

The Persian Empire, covering a territory greater than 5 million km², was the greatest empire in Eurasia until that period stretching from the Indus river to the east and Iaxartes river (Syr Darya) to the northeast to Caucasus, the Danube and Thrace to the west, to Arabia in the south, Cyrenaica in Libya to the west and the First Cataract of Egypt to the south. The Persian Empire united under a common rule the three major hydraulic civilizations” Mesopotamia, Indus, and Nile and included many nations and ethnic groups, echoing its self-perception as an empire including the countries of all nations’ (*dahyūnām vispazanām*).⁸

According to Herodotus’ perspective, the Persian expansion was not a random outcome of unrelated events, but the result of a long-term strategic planning focused on the control of four major power centers, i.e. Media, Lydia, Babylon, and Egypt. The geopolitical orientation of the nascent Persian Empire was established by Cyrus (r. 559-530 BC).and was continued by his successors. The Persian power core was located at the Iranian Plateau, a strategic area that allowed power projection in neighboring flat valleys. Through a series of conquests, the Persians gradually obtained strategic depth, gained access to resources and controlled critical economic highways. The logic underlying the Persian expansion is accumulative, but not random; every conquest intended to increase control of center on periphery and the creation of an imperial polity. The subduing of the Medes solidified Persian control in the Iranian Plateau, helped stabilize the northern front and united the ethnically related Iranian populations. The conquest of Lydia included the Anatolian plateau into Persian

⁷ J. Mankoff, *Empires of Eurasia: How Imperial Legacies Shape International Security*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022.

⁸ The term derives from the Behistun inscription (II 4-8). See R.G. Kent, *Old Persian Grammar, Texts, Lexicon*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953, 137.

territory, offering access to the Aegean and the Black Sea. Control of Babylon in Mesopotamia -the economic center of West Asia until the late 4th c. BC- gave agricultural wealth and bureaucratic expertise. The conquest of Egypt created a production base of agricultural wealth and gave access to the Red Sea, as well as a stable frontier until Cyrenaica in Libya to the west and Nubia to the south. The conquest of Phoenicia, Cyprus and Ionia increase the sea front of the Empire in the Mediterranean with focal ports and trade hubs and offered valuable human capital of maritime expertise.

Solidification of the Persian Empire created an intercontinental system of connectivity with major technical achievements, as the Royal Road, canals, and an administrative apparatus that connected imperial and local elites, the Iranian ethnic core with the various ethnic groups in the empire. Herodotus formulates a preliminary typology of continental expansion using the Persian conquests as an underlying principle in the first part of his *Histories* (Books I-VI) and as a case study in the second part (Books VII-IX). The Persian expansion and unification of Asia serves as the historical background to the epic clash with the Greek world of city-states.

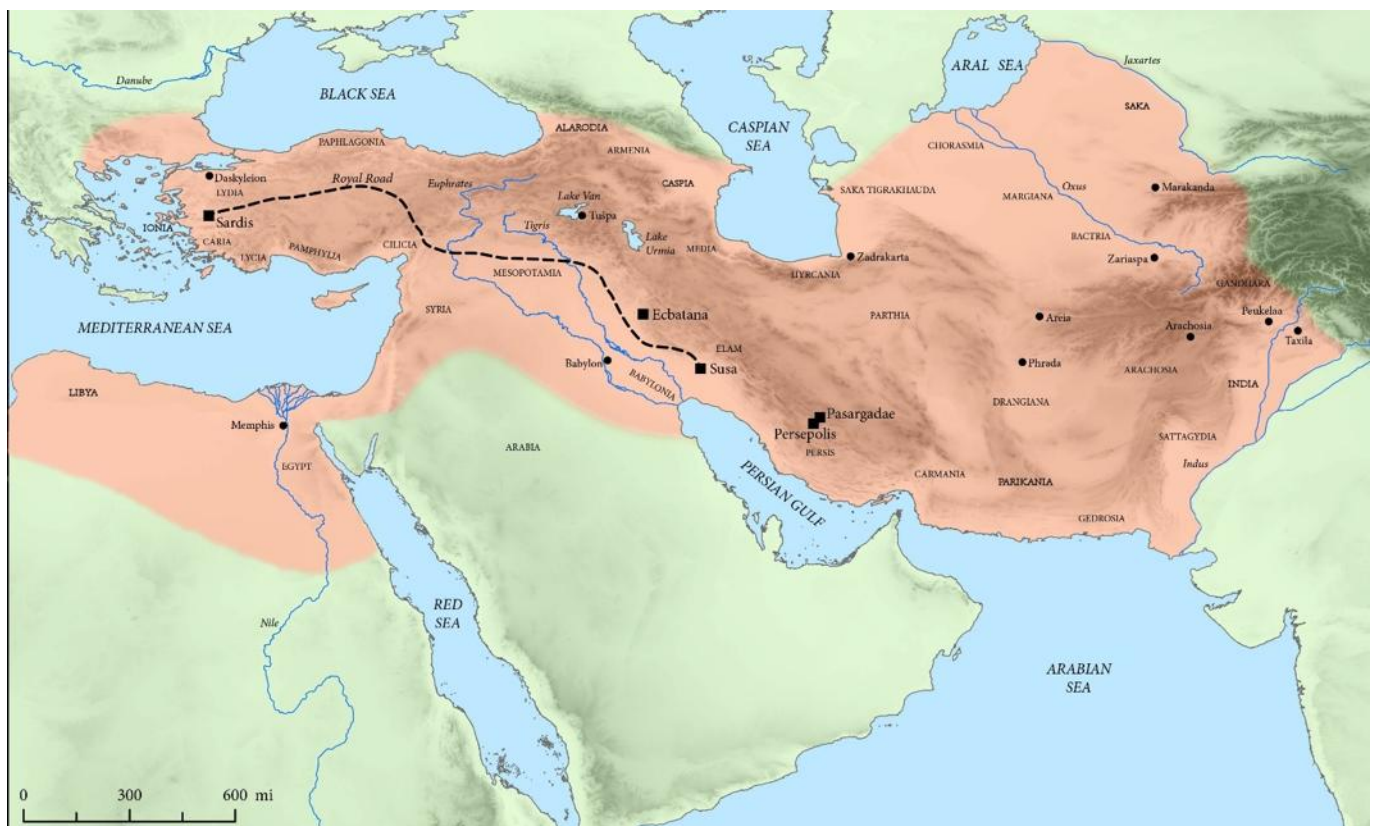
Persian imperialism followed strategic imperatives and goals making use of ideological and cultural aspects, such as Zoroastrian religious concepts and the claim of global domination.⁹ The campaigns against Greece were not just some punitive raid or some secondary border conflict; it was part of the Persian imperialist project of global domination.¹⁰ The strategic goals of Persian expansion were the stabilization of fragile frontiers, especially in areas with no distinct geophysical formations; the control of choke points –vital economic and military corridors, lanes and passages- at both land and sea; and the administrative unification of trade and tax flows with continental axes. The use of satraps and local leaders was a pragmatic choice of imperial rule over a multiethnic and multireligious population and a geographically varied landscape. The Royal Road (V 52-54) extending from Susa in the Iranian Plateau to Sardis in Lydia facilitated rapid communication, trade, intelligence gathering and movement of soldiers. This was the main economic and military axis of the empire allowing for power projection towards the Western peripheries and Europe.¹¹ The Persians built various canals, the most important of which was the one linking the Nile with

⁹ J.D. Mikalson, *Herodotus and Religion in the Persian Wars*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003.

¹⁰ *Histories* VII 19.1: «φέρειν τε ἐπὶ πασᾶν γῆν δουλεύειν τέ οἱ πάντας ἀνθρώπους».

¹¹ D.F. Graf, 'The Persian Royal Road System', in: H. Sancisi-Weerdenburg, A. Kuhrt & M.C. Root (eds), *Achaemenid History VIII: Continuity and Change*, Leiden: Brill, 1994, 167-189.

the Red Sea. The navy, based on Phoenician, Cilician and Ionian expertise, advanced the economic integration of the imperial territory.¹² There were also exploration missions of geographic mapping, often undertaken by Phoenician or Ionian seamen. At the behest of Darius I (r. 522-486 BCE), Scylax of Caryanda explored the Indian Ocean, sailing down the Indus River and circumnavigating the Arabian peninsula to reach the Sinai Peninsula (IV 44), as the first step of future military operations in the area.



The Persian Empire, first Eurasian land Empire

¹² C. Tuplin, 'Darius' Suez Canal and Persian Imperialism', in: H. Sancisi-Weerdenburg & A. Kuhrt (eds), *Achaemenid History VI: Asia Minor and Egypt. Old Cultures in a New Empire*, Leiden: Brill, 1991, 237-283.

The four directions of Persian expansion and its geographic limits

In their campaigns, the Persians faced geophysical limits and logistical problems. Herodotus creates a preliminary hermeneutical model of imperial expansion based on the four cardinal points to show how an imperial project of global aspirations can fail when it overcomes geophysical and cultural borders. The Persian expansion met its limits in four cases. In the steppes of Central Asia, it could not overcome the nomadic Massagetae; in North Africa, extension of supply lines led to disaster in modern-day Sudan; and in Scythia, modern-day Ukraine, the Persians faced the scorched earth tactics and decentralized structure of the nomadic Scythians. However, the decisive confrontation occurred in the Aegean Sea, against the hoplites and seamen of the Greek city-states, in the Persian Wars (490-479 BC). Using the geography to their advantage and employing their superior war tactics and cultural homogeneity, the Greeks inflicted a decisive defeat on the Persian Empire that proved essential for the rise of Europe and Western civilization.

In all these cases, the common strategic pattern is that control costs supersede conquest gains, supply lines become overextended and logistics unbearable in the long term. In this sense, Herodotus is the first author to describe the concept of strategic overextension using the ideological framework of his time.¹³ Herodotus' perspective on this matter is manifested through Artabanus, a member of the extended royal family, uncle of emperor Xerxes and his prudent advisor. Artabanus warned both Darius I –his brother- against the ill-fated campaign in Scythia and Xerxes –his nephew- against the invasion of Greece. During a royal council, Artabanus warned Xerxes against the conquest of Greece, pointing out the probability of military defeat and natural phenomena and the limits of logistics for a massive army, only to be ignored. Herodotus clearly believes that strategic overextension can lead to military disaster (VII 10).

Expansion to the east. In Central Asia Cyrus campaigned against the nomadic Massagetae, an Iranian tribe controlling the open grasslands east of the Caspian Sea, in what is modern-day Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan (I 205, 2). The Persians first attempted to expand their influence through a dynastic marriage between Cyrus and queen Tomyris; after the failure of that plan, they used tactics of agricultural sedentary populations against nomads unacquainted with wine by intoxicating and slaughtering the enemy warriors.

¹³ J.M. Romney, 'Herodotean Geography (4.36-45): A Persian Oikoumene?', *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 57 (2017), 862-881.

The campaign would end in defeat and Cyrus' death. The nomadic fierce Massagetae would be subdued in a new campaign (520-518 BC) undertaken by Darius I who was wise enough to not pursue any further advance into the open expanses of Central Asia. In this case, the heavy cavalry could not easily overcome the highly mobile light cavalry and archer tactics of the Massagetae. Nomadic settler patterns and a decentralized power structure did not allow for stable Persian control.

Expansion to the south. Cambyses (r. 530-522 BC) conquered Egypt extending Persian rule until the Cyrenaica, when the local Greek city-states pledged their allegiance. The initial Persian strategic planning was to attack Carthage and control the entire North African coast to the Atlantic Ocean. After the Phoenicians who composed the main bulk of the war fleet, refused to participate in a campaign against their ethnic brethren, attention shifted to the Kushite kingdom of Nubia (*Αιθιοπες*) in the far south of ancient cartographic perceptions.¹⁴ The Persian expeditionary corps met a hostile terrain, extreme climate conditions and overextension of supply lines. As a result, it reached only the Second Cataract of the Nile and disbanded amongst incidents of disorder and cannibalism (III 25).

Expansion to the north. The campaign of Darius I (r. 522-486 BC) against the Scythians (513-512 π.X.) presents a classical example of a confrontation between a bureaucratic empire and highly mobile nomad warriors that employ irregular warfare tactics. The Scythians turned the open expanses and their nomadic way of life into a strategic advantage (IV 46, 2-3). They avoided committing themselves into a decisive battle retreating eastwards, resorting instead to skirmishes with mounted archers against convoys and employing scorched earth tactics (laying waste to the countryside, blocking wells, destroying pastures). Since the Persian could not inflict a decisive defeat on their adversaries being unable to locate them, their advance stopped. The harsh climate conditions and the forthcoming winter season rendered the campaign pointless and beyond the logistics abilities of the Persian expeditionary corps (IV 120-142). This case bears analogy with later historical incidents, such as the Vietnam War, Soviet and US operations in Afghanistan and even the Ukraine war, in the use of irregular warfare tactics and the transformation of space itself into a strategic advantage to increase the cost of occupation.

Expansion to the west. King Xerxes (r. 486-465 BC). The attack on Greece was the climax of Persian imperialist ambitions aiming to subdue the dynamic world of Greece and Europe in general. Herodotus makes the distinction between and causal factors (structural

¹⁴ J.S. Romm, *The Edges of the Earth in Ancient Thought*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992, 49-60.

expansionism of the Persian Empire) and (Greek support of the Ionian Revolution). In Persian strategic through, only the unification of control on both sides of the Aegean Sea would allow for a stable Western periphery of the empire and form the basis for the subsequent expansion into continental Europe. Herodotus implies that the main causal factor is the inherent expansionism of the Asiatic Persian Empire that had manifested itself before (519 BC) the outbreak of the Ionian Revolution (499 BC) (III 134-136). The multiethnic Persian force composed of numerous ethnic groups subservient to the imperial rule clashes with the monoethnic world of the Greek city-states composed of a loose alliance of independent city-states. Only the prospect of Persian imperial control was able to unite the fiercely independent ancient Greek city-states and even then, not all of them. The geographical factor proved crucial for the success of Greek resistance. Critical choke points (Thermopylae, Artemision, and Salamis) were decisive for halting the advance, maintaining the balance and eventually inflicting defeat on the invading Persian forces. The numerical superiority of the Persians turned into a logistical burden and tactical strategic disadvantage, especially when confronted with the superior Greek war expertise and the geographical background of maritime and mountainous Greece. The Persian expansive power (control of spaces, numerical superiority) could not overcome the Greek intensive power (ethnic and cultural homogeneity, war expertise at land and sea, phalanx). The Greek victory highlights how an expansive land-based Eurasian empire can be contained with the strategic use of the sea by a decentralized national naval alliance that used choke points, maritime expertise, insularity and superior war expertise to its advantage.¹⁵

The failures of Persia in Central Asia, Nubia, Scythia and Greece are indicative of the limits of logistics for power projection in regions that lie in great distance from the imperial power core. Herodotus constantly emphasizes the fact that Persian expansion did not take into account the geophysical realities of rivers, seas, steppes, deserts. In a similar manner, the pre-industrial empires developed along an East-West axis, in accordance with adjacent climate zones than along a North-South axis, when geophysical and climate differences increase occupation cost.¹⁶ The Greek victory reflects the superiority of the Western way of

¹⁵ A. Platias & V. Trigkas, 'Themistocles: Leadership and Grand Strategy', in: E.M.L. Economou, N.C. Kyriazis & A. Platias (eds), *Democracy and Salamis: 2500 Years After the Battle That Saved Greece and the Western World*, Cham: Springer, 2022, 99-129.

¹⁶ P. Turchin, J. Adams & T.M. Hall, 'East-West Orientation of Historical Empires and Modern States', *Journal of World Systems Research* 12:2 (12/2006), 219-229.

war (decisive battle) and the importance of geography (fragmented space of Greece) and culture (ethnic and cultural homogeneity).

The strategic limits of empires

In Herodotus' perception, strategic overextension leads unavoidably to geopolitical disaster: ὕβρις (hybris) and the overcoming of natural and cultural limits leads to τίσις (retribution) and the restoration of the divine and natural order. The Persian attempt at global domination contrasts with the traditional Greek perception of geophysical and cultural limits. The rivers and the choke points (Hellespont, Bosphorus) are also focal points that divide continents, cultures, and geopolitical orders, define spheres of influence and define power relations. Characteristically, the Greek military leader Themistocles who was decisive in creating the Greek victory at the naval battle of Salamis holds the view that the Greek victory is a verification of 'divine order' that contrasts the dual dominion of a ruler in both Asia and Europe (VIII 109).

Herodotus' work has been interpreted as an indirect warning to Athenians of his time, advising against strategic overextension that would did occur during the Peloponnesian War (431-404 BC). We should remember that Herodotus' work was read not by the Persians, but by the Greeks of his time, in an era of intensifying antagonism between Sparta and Athens.¹⁷ Herodotus' *Histories* was probably published around 430 BC, after the Peloponnesian War had started. Herodotus originating from Halicarnassus, a city under Persian rule, had witnessed the positive effects of the Greek victory in the Persian Wars: containment of Persian influence outside Europe which would last for a century, until the Antalcidean Peace (386 BC), the establishment of the Delian League (478 BC) and the rise of Athenian sea power, with their focal consequences over the whole 5th century. In his work the emphasis on strategic overextension as a causal factor of defeat acts as a warning to the rising hegemonic power of Athens, a warning ignored by Athens with devastating results.¹⁸

The central idea of Herodotus is that imperial expansion faces geophysical and geopolitical limits. Each attempt to expand the Persian Empire towards the four cardinals experienced the structural limitations of geography and culture: steppes, deserts, seas, hostile terrains and climates and indomitable populations and superior institutions. In the

¹⁷ J. Moles, 'Herodotus and Athens', in: E.J. Bakker et al (eds.), *Brill's Companion to Herodotus*, 33-52.

¹⁸ H.R. Immerwahr, *Form and Thought in Herodotus*, Cleveland: American Philological Association, 1967, 215. C.W. Fornara, *Herodotus: An Interpretative Essay*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971, 51-58.

historical *longue durée*, continental empires are subject to structural limitations in their expansion; the Mongols could not infiltrate the forested regions of Eastern Europe, imperial France was unable to control the vast expanses of Russia, the Soviets ultimately failed in their attempt to control the highlands of Afghanistan. Herodotus of course is writing in a different era and does not use our modern terminology; still he analyzes behavioral patterns through concepts such as territorial relief, mobility, logistics, connectivity, natural and human resources, center and periphery relations. He also clearly distinguishes between land and sea powers, an essential distinction in Geopolitics.¹⁹

The Persian Empire is the historical model of a continental Eurasian empire that clashes with the sea power of the Greek city-states. In this geopolitical context, Greece is the defensive periphery of the imperial power core, which uses the territorial terrain and sea power to contain the expansion of the Eurasian hegemonic power. The Greek city-states in the Aegean Sea were the bulwark of Europe opposing the expansive Eurasian power. In the historical *longue durée*, the Aegean Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean in general have been a focal area of antagonism between Western and Eastern power: from the battle of Actium (31 BC) between Rome and Egypt to the siege of Constantinople (717) by the Arabs, the Battle of Lepanto between the Sacred League and the Ottoman Empire to the Battle of Navarino (1827) between three European powers and the Ottoman Empire that ensured the independence of modern Greece.

In Persian geopolitical perception, Greece was the most important obstacle in their plan to conquer all of Europe. The Greek populations that were living on the two shores of the Aegean Sea posed a threat to controlling Ionia itself (V 105), a liminal region of high strategic and economic importance.²⁰ Only the subduing of the Greeks on their continental mainland in the form of a preventive war would allow a future Greek campaign against the Persians in their Asiatic hinterland (VII 11, 3). It is clear that the Persians had fully realized the internal dynamism of the Greek world having been acquainted with Greek economic activities and military prowess through Greek merchants, mercenaries and Ionian seamen.²¹ The Persian perception would prove fatally right over time; the March of the Ten Thousand (401-399 BC) Greek mercenaries throughout Western Asia convinced Greeks that the Empire was ripe for the taking and the vision of destroying an ancestral enemy that had attacked

¹⁹ J.-M. Alonso-Nunez, 'Herodotus' Ideas about World Empires', *Ancient Society* 19 (1988), 125-133.

²⁰ T. Cuyler-Young Jr., '480-479 B.C.: A Persian Perspective', *Iranica Antiqua* 15 (1980), 213-239.

²¹ G.F. Seibt, *Griechische Söldner im Achaimenidenreich*, Bonn: Habelt, 1977.

Greece was fulfilled by Alexander the Great (336-323 BC) and his project of supplanting the Persian Empire with a Greek-led one.

Persian expansionism was not just a periodic incident, but also a structural feature of the Empire. In the case of Greece, preparations for the invasion had already begun in 519 BC, even as they were materialized in subsequent campaigns in the 490s and 480s. The Greco-Persian confrontation can be interpreted in modern terms, employing a core assumption of realism, the security dilemma: in an anarchic international environment, the increase of one state's security typically materialized as an increase in military strength, and the inherent uncertainty over the other side's intentions is perceived as a threat from other states in a spiral of insecurity. All sides then rush to increase their own military strength and preparedness, thereby creating an escalation cycle that ultimately becomes self-perpetuating.²² Finally, there is another aspect of the Greco-Persian confrontation that supersedes the dimension of military affairs, the cultural one. The Greco-Persian wars was also a clash on political modes of governance and ways of life, a clash between the politically decentralized but ethnically and culturally united Greek civilization and the diverse Asian civilizations forcefully unified under the autarchic Persian imperial rule.

The first clash of civilizations: The East versus the West

Herodotus is the first author to formulate a preliminary concept of civilizational confrontation that is reminiscent of the recent thesis of a 'clash of civilizations' by Samuel Huntington. The analogy is interesting but has to be taken with a grain of salt; Herodotus is in fact anti-Manichaeism in his perception of the East. Herodotus admires the imperial effectiveness of Persia, highlights their cultural multiplicity and does not adopt a clear distinctive model of Good vs. Evil (that was alien in ancient Greek thought in any case due to the inclusive parameter of their religion). The concept of an East-West confrontation is an underlying reference in his thought; still, it does not lead to cultural arrogance, ethnographic ignorance or underestimating the values of the opponent. This crucial aspect is what renders Herodotus' analysis of geopolitical value: cultural differences do not act as moral categories, but as strategic variables.

²² On the security dilemma see J. Herz, 'Idealist Internationalism and the Security Dilemma', *World Politics* 2:2 (1950), 171-201· R. Jervis, 'Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma', *World Politics* 30:2 (1978), 167-214.

The Herodotean philosophy of history is the first clash of civilizations. The underlying fundamental thesis of the work is the confrontation of Greek civilization with multiethnic Asia and its alien customs and laws (*νόμοι*), the existential battle of Greek autonomous polities based on the agricultural model of small farming units (*οἶκος*) against Asian administrative authoritarianism that united the great hydraulic civilizations based on collective work (Mesopotamia, Nile, Indus). *Histories* as a text is a political and military history of the Persian imperial expansion in Asia, in North Africa and its attempt to subdue Europe and reach the ends of the earth (I 95). In this context, Herodotus work presents a clear structure: it begins and ends with references to the distinction of Europe and Asia (I 4.4; IX 116.3). Herodotus' view is macro-historic; he distinguishes Europe and Asia in the *longue durée* and considers them two distinct geophysical and cultural entities, two different worlds that came to clash in the Persian Wars.

The Persian Wars are a survival battle of the Greek autonomous polities against Asian imperial despotism, a war of Hellas based on common descent, language, religion, and civilization (Herodotus' definition in what constitutes a nation is the first in the Western canon) against the Persian Empire and against multiethnic Asia which is culturally alien.²³ Characteristically enough, Herodotus dedicates a large segment of his book to describe the various ethnic groups that compose the imperial Persian army, thereby also offering his readers a full ethnographic and geographic image of the extended empire (VII 60-100). The ethnographic discourse presents Asian otherness which when united politically, economic and military level presents an existential danger for Greece. The underlying idea of Herodotus' work is thus the ultimate battle of Hellenism as a militant community that defends Europe and its way of life and the natural order itself against Asiatic expansionism.²⁴

The Herodotean work also examines the epic confrontation between the *intensive power* of Greeks based on the phalanx, maritime expertise, economic dynamism, geography of Greek space, and ethnic and cultural homogeneity and the *expansive power* of the Persians based on imperial authority and control of vast expanses and numerous heterogeneous populations in Asia.²⁵ The Greek world based on the phalanx and its sea power was able to inflict a decisive defeat on the multi-ethnic continental Persian Empire.

²³ Ηροδότου *Ιστορίη* VIII 144.2: «αὐτὶς δὲ τὸ Ἑλληνικόν, ἔδν ὁμαιμόν τε καὶ ὁμόγλωσσον, καὶ θεῶν ἰδρύματά τε κοινὰ καὶ θυσίαι ἡθεὰ τε ὁμότροπα».

²⁴ M. Pohlenz, *Herodot, der erste Geschichtschreiber des Abendlandes*, Leipzig: Teubner, 1937· H.R. Breitenbach, 'Herodotus pater historiae', *Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Geschichte* 16 (1966), 465-500.

²⁵ On the distinction between *intensive* and *expansive power* see I.E. Kotoulas, *Classical Geopolitics and Modern Greece*, Leiden: Brill, 2027.

The Greek sea power ultimately contained the expansive Persian land power in the focal area of the Aegean Sea, the geographical juncture of Europe and Asia. The stark difference between the dynamic autonomous Greek polities and Persian authoritarianism is reflected in two cases. Cyrus, the ruler that established the Persian Empire, speaks in a negative manner of Spartans as people who cheat one another in their agoras (I 153). This anecdote marks the contrast between the culture of political autonomy and the autarchic imperial model. The second one is the observation by exiled Spartan king and advisor to Xerxes Demaratus that the Greeks though they are free men, they are not entirely free since they accept law as their master (ἔπεστι γάρ σφι δεσπότης νόμος) (VII 104). For Greeks the concept of liberty was inherently connected to obedience to the laws of their city-state and the moral duties of their nation; this is disciplined liberty in defense of the political community.

Besides strategic overextension, Herodotus attributes imperial decay also to internal, anthropogeographic factors that determine the national character of a people. In this context, military success is connected to simplicity, poverty and the mountainous region of a country. Greek military prowess (ἀρετή) derives from two important factors. The first one is the poverty of the Greek population, itself a natural outcome of the geophysical formation of the Greek territory. The second one is willing submission to the law and customs (νόμος) of an autonomous political community as opposed to Asiatic despotism, material wealth of the East, and arbitrary rule of imperial authority (VII 102.1). Herodotus believes that the Persians themselves featured the virtues related to poverty and mountainous formation; it was the imperial model that altered their anthropogeographic characteristics, making them servient and prone to luxuries and willing to submit to a despotic authority. Interestingly enough, *Histories* conclude with this issue as a reflection on the past. Herodotus thus believes that the creation of the Persian Empire was a fundamental geopolitical mistake in perverting the character of the Persians and leading to strategic defeat through its constant expansion attempts. Artembares, an official, advises Cyrus that the Persians should leave their rugged homeland at the Iranian Plateau for a better country. The proposal was firmly rejected by the Persian king because such a decision would alter the fighting spirit of the Persians: soft countries give birth to soft men with no warlike spirit and in that case, the Persians would become the slaves of others (IX 122). Thus, Herodotus concludes his causal interpretation concerning the limits of power and the constraints of imperial expansion according to a geopolitical and anthropogeographic perspective.²⁶

²⁶ J-M. Alonso-Nunez, 'Herodotus' Ideas about World Empires', 130.

Conclusions: Why Herodotus belongs to the geopolitical canon

Herodotus, a historian that stands on the juncture of the Archaic and the Classical Age, offers the most ancient coherent analysis on the relation of power and geography and on the rise, expansion and containment of imperial polities. His expertise derives from his sense of historicity, his acute observations and his extensive travels in the Persian Empire and beyond. The continental Persian Empire is used as a case study in Herodotus' work. The Persian Empire is the first Eurasian empire in history, incorporated in its power structure four political cores (Medes, Lydians, Babylonians, and Egyptians) and attempted to expand towards the four cardinal points meeting its limits in Central Asia, Nubia, Scythia, and Greece. Expansion is an inherent logic of empires; still, geography, logistics and management of peripheries set structural constraints on the expansion of the imperial polities. The most decisive confrontation occurred in the Aegean Sea, against the Greek city-states. Using geography to their advantage and employing their superior war tactics and cultural homogeneity, the Greeks inflicted a decisive defeat on the Persian Empire that proved essential for the rise of Europe and Western civilization. In his *Histories*, this epic narrative of the clash between the West and the East, Herodotus introduces a cyclical perception of the rise and fall of imperial power. In the context of Geopolitics, he analyzes the difficulties in managing multiethnic and multireligious empires and the essential distinction between land and sea powers. He also describes two essential aspects of Geopolitics: the Eurasian structural pressure on Europe that would be formulated as the Heartland Theory by Halford J. Mackinder and the clash of civilizations by Samuel P. Huntington. In this sense, Herodotus as a seminal thinker of power, geography, culture, and history, is not just the father of History, but the starting point of Geopolitics as well. Every history of geopolitical thought has to begin with Herodotus.