

REVIEW

THE FINAL INSTALMENT OF
THE VALLA HERODOTUS

Pietro Vannicelli, Aldo Corcella, and Giuseppe Nenci, edd. and trans., Erodoto, *Le Storie, Volume VII: Libro VII, Serse e Leonida*. Fondazione Lorenzo Valla. Milan: Mondadori, 2017. Pp. civ + 609. Hardback €35.00. ISBN 978-88-04-50316-3.

‘Only by great risk can great results be achieved’ (Hdt. 7.50.3: *μεγάλα γὰρ πρήγματα μέγαλοισι κινδύνοισι ἐθέλει καταϊρέεσθαι*), says King Xerxes to Artabanus in one of the most famous dialogues in Herodotus’ Book 7. The book under scrutiny is the final instalment of a great effort that has finally been brought to completion: the edition, Italian translation, and commentary of Herodotus’ *Histories*. The outcome of this editorial labour is evidently the opposite of Xerxes’ disastrous invasion of Greece.

The project started in the 1970s and involved numerous scholars, most notably David Asheri (1925–2000) and Giuseppe Nenci (1924–99), tutelary gods of the whole initiative. The first volume, edited by Agostino Masaracchia and containing Book 8, appeared in 1977, followed in 1978 by Book 9: these two books were later replaced by completely revised editions by David Asheri, Aldo Corcella, and Augusto Fraschetti.¹ The commentaries on Books 1–4,

¹ It may be useful to include here a list of each Herodotean volume published by the Fondazione Lorenzo Valla (Mondadori) and the roles of the various scholars who took part in the initiative:

- Volume I: general introduction by David Asheri; Book 1: edited with commentary by David Asheri, translation by Virgilio Antelami (1988)
- Volume II: Book 2: introduction, edition of the Greek text, and commentary by Alan B. Lloyd, translation by Augusto Fraschetti (1989)
- Volume III: Book 3: introduction and commentary by David Asheri, edition of the Greek text by Silvio M. Medaglia, translation by Augusto Fraschetti (1990)
- Volume IV: Book 4: introduction and commentary by Aldo Corcella, edition of the Greek text by Silvio M. Medaglia, translation by Augusto Fraschetti (1993)
- Volume V: introduction to Books 5–9 by Giuseppe Nenci; Book 5: introduction, edition of the Greek text, commentary, and translation by Giuseppe Nenci (1994)
- Volume VI: Book 6: introduction, edition of the Greek text, commentary, and translation by Giuseppe Nenci (1998)
- Volume VII: Book 7: introduction and commentary by Pietro Vannicelli, edition of the Greek text by Aldo Corcella, translation by Giuseppe Nenci (revised by Vannicelli and Corcella) (2017)

alongside Asheri's general introduction, were translated into English and published by Oxford University Press.² A second volume, including Books 5–9, is now under contract with the same publisher.

Herodotus' Book 7 covers the decade from 490/489 BCE, when Darius is informed of the outcome of the battle of Marathon, to the summer of 480 BCE and the battle of Thermopylae. It opens the section on the Persian Wars (Μηδικά), which are recounted in Books 7–9 and represent the culmination of the whole Herodotean narrative. The focus of Book 7 is Xerxes' military expedition against Greece, its genesis, preparations, the march of its army from the heart of the Persian empire to Greece through the Hellespont, and finally the battle at Thermopylae. Even if the current division of Herodotus' *Histories* is almost certainly not the author's own, but the product of Hellenistic scholarship, the contents of Book 7 fit very well with the Herodotean chronological and thematic exposition of events.

The opening lines of the Book connect its subject matter with the previous Book and proceed to give an account of Darius' projects for an invasion (chs 1–4), taken up after his sudden death by his successor Xerxes (chs 5–19). A couple of chapters of interlude introduce the preparations for the war and the march of Xerxes' mighty army to the boundaries of the empire and to Macedonia and Thessaly (chs 22–131). The structure and content of roughly the first half of Book 7 represent a clear allusion to the beginning of the *Iliad*: the meeting (σύλλογος) of the Persian noblemen (chs 8–11) and Xerxes' dreams (chs 12–19) recall respectively the assembly of the Achaeans (*Il.* 1.53–303) and Agamemnon's deceitful dream (*Il.* 2.1–40), while the catalogue of Persian troops (chs 60–100) evokes the Iliadic Catalogue of Ships (*Il.* 2.494–759). These Homeric references, which Herodotus' audience could easily identify, enrich the whole narrative and set Book 7, alongside the rest of the work, in direct dialogue with traditional epic poetry.

In chs 131–78, Herodotus gives an account of the reactions of the Greek communities to the Persian invasion: the strong will of Sparta and Athens to fight Xerxes' army; the somewhat ambiguous attitude of certain Greek *poleis*; the collaborationism, for which the Greeks used the verb *μηδίζω* ('to side with the Medes') of the Thessalians.

- Volume VIII: Book 8: introduction and commentary by David Asheri (updated by Pietro Vannicelli), edition of the Greek text by Aldo Corcella, translation by Augusto Fraschetti (2003)
- Volume IX: Book 9: introduction and commentary by David Asheri (updated by Pietro Vannicelli), edition of the Greek text by Aldo Corcella, translation by Augusto Fraschetti (2006)

² D. Asheri, A. B. Lloyd, and A. Corcella, *A Commentary on Herodotus Books I–IV*, edd. O. Murray and A. Moreno, with a contribution by M. Brosius (Oxford, 2007).

The Persian and Greek narratives are finally reunited when ten Persian ships encounter three Greek triremes at Hdt. 7.179. This is the first naval skirmish of Xerxes' expedition, followed by the storm at Mount Pelium, the march of the Persian army to the territory of Trachis, and the geographical descriptions of the area (chs 179–200). The account culminates with the battle of Thermopylae where a small contingent of Peloponnesians and Boeotians held the narrow pass for three days before being surrounded and defeated by the Persians (chs 200–25). In the final section (chs 226–39), Herodotus recounts a number of different traditions on the battle and the events that followed it: he evidently obtained the information mostly at Sparta and Delphi.

Digressions abound and contribute to making the reading of Book 7 both informative and entertaining, a characteristic of the *Histories* that most readers are familiar with.

The contents of the book under review include an introduction (ix–xxxvi), a list of bibliographical abbreviations (xxxix–lxxvii), a summary of the content of Book 7 (lxxix–lxxxii), followed by various maps (lxxxiii–civ). The useful and crisp 'Nota al testo del libro VII' (6–16) was written by Corcella, who is also responsible for the Greek text, the critical apparatus, and the short sections dedicated to the 'Scholia' (285–9) and the 'Lexeis' (291–4). For this exegetical material, for which an Italian translation has been given, Corcella has relied on the studies of Heinrich Stein and Haiim B. Rosén, even though it has been recognised that Rosén's edition of the Herodotean *lexeis*, as it appears in *Eine Laut- und Formenlehre der herodotischen Sprachform* (Heidelberg, 1962) 218–31, is inadequate.³

The Italian translation was completed by Giuseppe Nenci, who died in 1999; some minor revisions have been introduced by Corcella and Vannicelli in order to adapt the translation to the textual choices and exegetical proposals formulated in the text and commentary. The facing Greek text and Italian translation (18–283) are followed by Vannicelli's commentary, the first one since How and Wells' *A Commentary on Herodotus*, vols 1–2 (1912): it covers almost half of the whole Book, namely pp. 297–592. Finally, a useful index of Greek names in Herodotus' Book 7 fittingly closes the volume (595–609).

In the Introduction, Vannicelli deals briefly and aptly with the place of Book 7 in the narrative structure of the *Histories*. He then focuses on the various episodes in this book that are chronologically distinct from the main narrative, on the speeches and dialogues that feature in the story, on the themes and main characters of the book, from Xerxes and other Persian nobles, to Athens and Sparta, to those Greeks who supported the invasion. The adherence to

³ See F. Montana, 'Per il testo della redazione A (non alfabetica) delle *Lexeis* di Erodoto', in M. Tziatzi, M. Billerbeck, F. Montanari, and K. Tsantsanoglou, edd., *Lemmata. Beiträge zum Andenken an Christos Theodoridis / Essays in Honour of Christos Theodoridis* (Berlin and Boston, 2015) 431–51, esp. 437–9.

the Homeric model is considered both generally in the introduction and specifically in the commentary. The same goes for Aeschylus' *Persians*, written in the decade following the end of the Persian Wars. Its depiction of Xerxes' defeat is challenged and reworked by Herodotus both in Book 7 and in subsequent Books.

The last section of the introduction is devoted to a long-standing issue in Herodotean studies: Herodotus' sources, the context of his narrative, and its historical value. According to Vannicelli, the historical value of the *Histories* can be categorised as follows: those facts that Herodotus reports, the development of the traditions on which Herodotus relies, and the Herodotean reworking of these traditions (xxviii). Naturally, our caution as modern interpreters of Herodotus should always be great, but we should not renounce a tentative reconstruction of the factual events. Book 7 is especially instructive for the historical context that underlies most of the narrative and is intrinsically linked to Achaemenid history. The last forty years have allowed for a deeper understanding of the history of the Persian empire that does not rely solely on Greek sources, but attempts to offer a broader perspective based on Persian and, more generally, oriental sources. This decolonisation of classical scholarship, i.e., a scholarly approach that focuses on historical, literary, and cultural traditions outside the Greco-Roman world, has been going hand in hand with new trends in Herodotean studies. The oral component of the *Histories* has been highlighted yielding significant results for understanding the author and his work, as well as the historical, cultural, and political environment in which he thrived. Moreover, the *Histories* are now considered within the broader issues of the development of Greek and oriental historical traditions in the archaic and classical world. As Vannicelli remarks: 'Erodoto appare sempre più non come un raccoglitore di informazioni e dati, ma come un rielaboratore di tradizioni già strutturate (orali e scritte), profondamente influenzate dal contesto storico, culturale e letterario contemporaneo e da lui spesso rifunzionalizzate all'interno di un progetto storiografico senza precedenti per ampiezza e complessità' (xxx).

The commentary focuses on historical and literary issues, avoids an extreme literal approach to the text, and shuns abstract narratological interpretations. The wide range of topics covered by Vannicelli in the commentary and the limited scope of a book review do not allow for an extensive discussion. However, in order to illustrate the significance of Vannicelli's work, I have chosen one example from the latter section of Book 7.

At 7.228 Herodotus reports three inscriptional epigrams composed for the Greeks fallen at the battle of Thermopylae: one for the Peloponnesians, another for the Lacedaemonians, and a third one for the seer Megistias. The two lines of elegiac distich for the Peloponnesians, assigned to Simonides (Page, *FGE* XXIIa (pp. 231–4)) and reported by Herodotus (7.228.1), as well as many subsequent authorities (Diod. 11.33.2; Aristid. 28.65 (II.162 Keil); *Anth. Pal.*

7.248), hyperbolically states that four thousand Peloponnesians fought against three million enemies:

μυριάσιν ποτὲ τᾶδε τριακοσίαις ἐμάχοντο
ἐκ Πελοποννάσου χιλιάδες τέτορες.

Here four thousand from the Peloponnese once fought three million.

The reader who wants to find out more about the epigrams reported by Herodotus at 7.228 can look at Vannicelli's commentary at 581–2; there, he will also find cross-references to other sections of the commentary, especially those dealing with the number of Peloponnesian and Persian troops reported earlier by Herodotus. Thus, one can easily find that the exact number of Peloponnesians fighting at the Thermopylae is given by Herodotus at 7.202: 300 Spartiates, 500 Tegeans, 500 Mantineans, 120 Arcadian Orchomenians, and 1,000 other Arcadians, 400 Corinthians, 200 Phliuntians, 80 Mycenaeans—the total tally being 3,100 soldiers. For the Persians, the overall number of soldiers, including those enlisted in Europe was, again according to Herodotus, 2,641,610 (see Hdt. 7.184–5). Vannicelli rightly remarks that in the *Histories* numbers are highly symbolic: the historian endeavoured to report different traditions without focusing too much on the contradictions; still, he often displayed his preferences, sometimes tacitly, sometimes openly (582).

The example of the epigram for the 4,000 Peloponnesians displays that the celebration of the Greeks' victory over the Persians went almost immediately through an amplification of the number of enemies. With the aid of Vannicelli's commentary, the reader can attempt to discern what is historically reliable or at least plausible in the reported number of soldiers fighting at Thermopylae, what comprised the layers of the tradition on the Persian Wars among the Greeks, what is known from the Persian perspective, and, finally, how Herodotus rearranged and reinterpreted these various threads to create a unique and memorable narrative.

This is one of the many examples in which Vannicelli's well-balanced commentary is extremely helpful both for navigating Herodotus' text and for obtaining the necessary historical, cultural, and literary references. As far as I have been able to assess, the bibliographic references are always exhaustive and up to date.

The Greek text established by Corcella reflects a long-standing familiarity with Herodotus' manuscript tradition and related scholarship. The most recent edition of Herodotus, Wilson's OCT (2015), was only partially taken into account (see the footnote on p. 5), while the usefulness of Rosén's Teubner (1987–97) was already dismissed by Corcella in *RFIC* 117 (1989) 235–53 and 126 (1998) 76–85. For the constitution of the text, Corcella has relied mainly on

four *codices* belonging to the two classes of manuscripts identified long ago as the *stirps Florentina* and *stirps Romana*, respectively A (Laur. LXX 3) (with some contributions from B (Rom. Angel. 83) and C (Laur. conv. suppr. 207)) and D (Vat. gr. 2369). The readings of the manuscripts that have a common source in β (marked with the letters RSUVX), have been reported only when a variant in β is in accordance with ABC against D, so that the reader can easily identify when a reading is only reported in D. Readings found in later excerpts have been reported only sporadically. The contribution of the papyri (only three were known to Corcella when he prepared his edition) is also very limited, with the notable exception of $\Delta\alpha\rho\delta\acute{\alpha}\nu\omicron\upsilon$ of *P.Oxy.* 3381 for $\beta\alpha\rho\beta\acute{\alpha}\rho\omicron\upsilon$ of the manuscript tradition at Hdt. 7.169.2. Finally, references to the indirect tradition (i.e., the passages of Herodotus reported by later historians, orators, grammarians, and lexicographers) and the variant readings therein recorded have also been included in the critical apparatus. One might point out that a history of the reception of Herodotus in the Byzantine age has yet to be written: the apparatus of the Valla Herodotus will thus be of great value for those who will undertake such a work.

The publication of Herodotus' Book 7 of the Fondazione Lorenzo Valla (Mondadori) brings to successful completion a long editorial history. The high standard of this volume's introduction, Greek text, Italian translation, and commentary will represent a benchmark for future work on Herodotus' Book 7. It will certainly serve as an invaluable tool for anyone interested not only in Herodotus and everything Herodotean, but in the history of the Persian empire as well. In cases like the present volume, a reviewer's job is simply to offer an overview of the work and a general judgement on its contribution to scholarship. It will be for Herodotean scholars themselves to judge and make the most of the work that has been poured into this well-produced book.

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