CHAPTER 7

Croesus’ Offerings and the Value of the Past in Herodotus’ Histories*

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1 Introduction

This paper explores the relationship between visible evidence and the value of the past in Herodotus’ Histories. The discussion is framed by the temporal dimension of physical objects and architectural features in Herodotus’ narrative and, by extension, in the writing of history more generally. What particular qualities do descriptions of the phenomenal world bring to our understanding of the historical past? A related topic is the relationship between the visual content of the historical narrative and reading as its mediating practice. Narratological approaches situate this practice within the various rhetorical strategies, e.g., prolepsis and analepsis, that structure historical time. More generally, the representation of past time in Greek narrative is explained in terms of the causes and effects of memory as experienced or endorsed by characters, narrators and readers.1 There is no question that memory (mnêmê) is a powerful concept in the Greek tradition; its role as a heuristic device in Classical Studies can be understood as a natural consequence of this fact. But the privileging of memory, with its roots in the formal structures of orally-derived poetry, has had the effect of overshadowing the significance of visual and other modes of perception in accessing and assessing the meaning and value of the past.2

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1 Grethlein 2010 takes memory as both the starting point and central concept in his account of the rise of Greek historiography in the pre- or proto-literate milieu of the fifth century. See also Grethlein 2009.

2 In discussing the emergence of the history of trauma for example, Ankersmit 2005, 4 notes ‘the use of the term memory where we previously preferred to speak of “History” or of “the past”. This new idiom suggests an interesting shift in the nature of contemporary historical consciousness.’ According to Ankersmit, this shift is guided by the ‘experience of the past’
My premise is that descriptions of the material world in history writing produce a singular, even unique, reading experience.3 As a figure for this experience, the reader of history is positioned as a virtual viewer of the past defined in terms of what is no longer or is only partially visible, i.e., of the past as a receding visual field. Beginning with Herodotus’ intention to insure that ‘the past deeds (τὰ γενόμενα, ta genomena) of men may not fade with time’ (Hdt. praef.), this definition of the past is explored in the relationship between oracles and objects, notably Croesus’ offerings at Delphi, in the Lydian Logos. More specifically, I examine a particular historico-linguistic feature in Herodotus’ narrative, namely, his descriptions of the offerings that exist up to his own time (ἐπ’ ἐμέο, μέχρι ἐμεῦ, etc.). In disciplinary terms, the expression ‘up to my time’ in the Histories contributes to what I have elsewhere called a proto-archaeological discourse, founded on the principle that the value of the past is determined in part in relation to visible evidence in the present.4

Before turning to Herodotus’ text, however, it is important to locate the discussion within current and ongoing debates over the connection between the historical past and the historical text in the philosophy of history.5 Doing so acknowledges the contemporary perspective that frames the argument and foregrounds the question of what it means to read Herodotus’ text in our own time. I begin with Frank Ankersmit’s distinction between ‘looking at’ and ‘looking through’ the historical text as a succinct formula for assessing the value of reading history. I take seriously Ankersmit’s use of visual metaphors to refer to the epistemological dilemma that lies at the heart of historical narrative since the linguistic turn, namely, the relationship between the reality of the past and the rhetorical structures that shape that reality. In the present context, this relationship is expressed as a function of the rhetorical strategies that invest visible or material objects with temporal meaning. In order to better understand this function, I then turn briefly to the relationship between what Alois Riegl has called the ‘age-value’ and the ‘historical value’ of artifacts and monuments. Although formulated in the context of an early twentieth-century

in which experience is not limited to sensory perception but also includes ‘such a thing as “intellectual experience”’ (5–7) although it is not clear how memory and ‘intellectual experience’ are related in Ankersmit’s argument.

3 This experience differs, for example, from the aesthetic experience of reading ephrastic descriptions. On ephrasis, see Webb 2009 with Goldhill’s review 2009. See also Elsner 2007 for a pertinent discussion of tragedy as the source of ephrastic passages in Philostratus’ Imagines.

4 Bassi, forthcoming.

5 See the Introduction to Part I of Partner, forthcoming.