CHAPTER 10

Valla’s Herodotean Labours: Towards a New View of Herodotus in the Italian Renaissance

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In October of 1451 Lorenzo Valla (1407–1457) wrote to Giovanni Tortelli (1400–1466), keeper of the new papal library. He related how a year earlier he had been invited by the ‘reformers’ in Pope Nicholas V’s entourage to lecture on rhetoric at the Studium Urbis. He had nearly finished translating Thucydides for Nicholas (1397–1455) when, in an attempt to implement university reform, the pope ordered that a rotulus or scroll be inscribed with the names of those professors who were Roman citizens and presented publicly. Externi doctores (“foreign teachers”) were to be abrogated from their university commission, leaving only professors of Roman extraction. To Valla’s dismay his name was missing from the list, “as if I were not a Roman, born and raised in this city; I who have done more for the renown of Rome, at least in literary terms, in a single prologue to the Elegantiae than all the others put together”.1 Needless to say he was not abrogated from his chair of rhetoric, and to the chagrin of his detractors he remained a permanent fixture in the Curia. In fact, he went on to translate Herodotus’ Histories while working under Nicholas V until 1455.2 It was due to this coincidence between the papal initiatives of Nicholas V to reform the church and renovate the city of Rome on the one hand and Valla’s program of restoring Latin literary culture to its original Romanitas on the other that Herodotus was entrusted to an extensive Latin readership for the first time in history.3

Yet the most conspicuous feature of Herodotus’ reception in the humanist historiography of the 15th century is his absence. To say that Herodotus was “absent” is to say that, despite their veneration of him, humanist historians

3 For my understanding of humanism as a ‘reform movement’ that, at least among Roman humanists, often coincided with the papal initiatives of Nicholas V see Coluccia (1998) 158. On the subject see also Pagliaroli, (2005) 147–163, here 162 n. 1 and Pagliaroli (2006a) 9–67, here 31 n. 2, 63 n. 1 and 66 n. 3.
rarely, if ever, adopted Herodotus as a model for writing history. This claim should not be mistaken for a lack of interest in reading Herodotus, in citing him, in circulating manuscripts of the *Histories*, translating him or even composing the occasional mythographical couplet in his honor. It is not to say that humanist historians did not pay homage to the great historian in the prefaces to their own histories or cite him as an authority in public orations on the nature of history. What I mean is that Herodotus did not offer to humanist historians a viable historiographical option or way to write their own histories. This chapter, then, is confronted with a proverbial difficulty, and that is to prove a negative. Fortunately, however, a solution has already been made as canonical as the problem itself. It was precisely the absence of Herodotus as a model for writing history in the Renaissance that incited Arnaldo Momigliano to explain why Herodotus enjoyed an ‘ambiguous’ reputation in the 15th century. This chapter builds on the work of Momigliano’s research while offering a different explanation for that odd mixture of reverence and scepticism with which humanists often approached Herodotus.

Momigliano attempted to explain the ‘ambiguous’ reputation of Herodotus in the Renaissance by accounting for the rival claimants to the title ‘father of history’—Moses, Dares Phrygius and Dictys Cretensis. He found, however, that what really proved a stumbling block to Herodotus both in ancient and in early modern historiography was Thucydides. Thucydides, Momigliano claimed, had established the methodological protocol which became standard fare for all major Hellenistic historians. After Thucydides, according to Momigliano, historians generally believed the task of history was to narrate contemporary political events by examining sources critically and isolating...