



MYTHOPOUCH

RETELLING

HERODOTUS: THE HISTORIES

VOL. 1 THE INQUIRY BEGINS

Chapters 1-4

A modern educational version for readers aged 15 and up

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CHAPTER 1: SO THAT THE DEEDS DO NOT FADE

This is the inquiry of **Herodotus** (*heh-ROD-oh-tus*) of Halicarnassus. He wrote it so that what people have done should not be rubbed out by time, and so that the great and astonishing works of Greeks and non-Greeks should not go without a name. Above all, he wanted to set down why they went to war with one another.

Read that first sentence again. It is one of the most ambitious openings in literature. Herodotus is not promising a chronicle of kings and dates. He is promising an *inquiry*, in Greek, an *historie*, which is where the English word history comes from. An inquiry asks questions. It travels. It listens to people who disagree. And it refuses to let either side of a quarrel own the whole story.

A WORD HE USES, AND A WORD WE WILL NOT HIDE

Herodotus calls everyone who is not Greek a **barbarian**. The word did not mean what a modern reader hears. It began as a description of speech: to a Greek ear, foreign languages sounded like *bar-bar*, a noise without meaning. So a barbarian was a foreigner. Persians, Egyptians, Lydians, Scythians, all barbarians, in his mouth, and some of them he admires more than he admires Greeks. This retelling will say *non-Greek* or name the people, and will keep his word when the point is the Greek habit of sorting the world into us and everyone else.

FOUR ABDUCTIONS, AND A THEORY OF THE WAR

The learned men of Persia, he says, traced the quarrel back to the **Phoenicians** (*foh-NEE-shuns*). They had come from the Red Sea coast to the Mediterranean, settled, and taken to long voyages, carrying Egyptian and Assyrian goods. They put in at **Argos**, which in those days outshone every state later called Greek. On the fifth or sixth day, when the cargo was nearly sold, a crowd of women came down to the shore. Among them was the king's daughter, **Io** (*EYE-oh*), child of Inachus.

While the women bargained at the stern, the Phoenicians rushed them. Most escaped. Io and some others were seized, thrown aboard, and carried to Egypt. That, say the Persians, was the first wrong.

Later, certain Greeks (Cretans, the Persians think, though they cannot name them) put in at Tyre and carried off the king's daughter **Europa**. So far, they say, the score was even. Then Greeks sailed a warship to Aea in Colchis, on the river Phasis, and after their other business carried off the king's daughter **Medea**. The king of Colchis sent a herald to demand her back and satisfaction for the seizure. The Greeks answered that Asia had given no satisfaction for Io, and they would give none for Medea.

In the next generation, **Alexander**, whom the Greeks call Paris, son of Priam, heard these stories and decided he might take a wife from Greece by force. He would not have to pay, he thought, because the Greeks had not paid. He carried off **Helen**. The Greeks sent messengers to demand her and satisfaction. The answer came back as an accusation: you gave no satisfaction for Medea, and you refused it when it was asked, and now you want it for yourselves.

Up to that point, say the Persians, there had only been seizures on both sides. After that the Greeks were greatly to blame, because they levied a war on Asia before Asia levied one on Europe. To seize women by violence, the Persians hold, is the act of wicked men. To make a fuss about avenging them is the act of fools. To pay the matter no regard is the act of wise men, for if the women had not been willing, they could not have been carried off. Asia, they say, made no account of the women who were taken. The Greeks, for the sake of one Spartan woman, gathered a great fleet, came to Asia, and overthrew the kingdom of Priam. From that day the Persians counted the Greeks as enemies. Asia and the peoples who live in it they claim as their own. Europe, and the Greek people, they count as something else entirely.

Historian's Note: Abduction is not a love story

Herodotus is reporting a Persian explanation, not endorsing it. The claim that a seized woman must have been willing is an old excuse, and he lets you hear it. Io, Europa, Medea, and Helen are not decorations. In this telling they are the pretext great powers use when they want a war. Ages 15 and up: the violence here is seizure and the politics built on it, not a romance.

THE PHOENICIANS DISAGREE

On Io, the Phoenicians do not accept the Persian account. They say they used no violence. She had a connection at Argos with the master of a ship, found herself pregnant, and sailed with them of her own accord, afraid of her parents. Such are the Persian and Phoenician stories.

Herodotus will not inquire whether they happened. He has a different method. He will name the man he himself knows to have been the first to commit injustice against the Greeks, and then go on with the history, touching small states and great ones alike. Of those who were once powerful, many have become weak. Some who were powerful in his own time were weak before. Human prosperity is a precarious thing. He will commemorate both.

That refusal is the real beginning of the book. He has shown you the myths. He has shown you that each side tells them to its own advantage. Then he steps past them. The first man he will hold responsible is not Paris and not a Phoenician trader. It is **Croesus** (*KREE-sus*), king of Lydia.

THE FOUR SEIZURES, AS THE PERSIANS TELL THEM

Woman	Taken from	Taken by	What it is said to answer
Io	Argos	Phoenicians	The first wrong, Asia against Europe
Europa	Tyre	Greeks, said to be Cretans	A repayment
Medea	Colchis	Greeks in a warship	The second Greek provocation
Helen	Sparta	Paris of Troy	The pretext for a Greek war on Asia

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Herodotus opens by promising an inquiry, not a verdict. What is the difference, and why might it matter when two nations are already sure they know who started a war?
2. The Persian speakers treat the seizure of women as wicked, and the avenging of it as foolish. What does that argument do to Io, Europa, Medea, and Helen? Who gets to speak in this story, and who does not?
3. Herodotus says he will record the weak as well as the strong, because prosperity does not stay put. Can you think of a modern state, company, or reputation that seemed permanent and was not?

CHAPTER 2: THE KING WHO COULD NOT LOOK AWAY

Croesus was a Lydian, son of Alyattes, and lord of the peoples west of the river **Halys** (*HAY-lis*). That river runs between the Syrians (Herodotus means the people of Cappadocia) and the Paphlagonians, and empties north into the Black Sea, which the Greeks called the Euxine. Croesus was the first non-Greek, so far as Herodotus knows, who made some Greeks pay tribute and bound others to him by alliance. He subdued the Ionians, the Aeolians, and the Dorians settled in Asia, and he made a treaty with the Spartans. Before him, the Greeks were free. An earlier raid by the Cimmerians had been for plunder, not for rule.

The throne had not always belonged to his house. It had belonged to the **Heraclidae**, a line that claimed descent from Heracles, and it passed to the family called the **Mermnadae** in a way that still makes people look at the floor.

CANDAULES AND THE BODYGUARD

Candaules (*kan-DAW-leez*), whom the Greeks call Myrsilus, was tyrant of Sardis, last of the Heraclidae. He was in love with his own wife, and being in love he thought her the most beautiful of women. He had a bodyguard, **Gyges** (*JY-jeez*), son of Dascylus, whom he trusted with his greatest affairs, and to this man he praised his wife's beauty past all measure.

In time (for Candaules was fated to come to grief) he said to Gyges: you do not believe me when I speak of her beauty. Men's ears are less trusting than their eyes. You must contrive to see her naked.

Gyges cried out. What a proposal, to bid him look on his queen without her clothes. A woman, he said, puts off her modesty with her dress. Old maxims tell a man to look to his own business. He believed she was the most beautiful of her sex. He begged not to be asked to do a wicked thing.

The king told him to take courage. This was not a test, and the queen would not know. Gyges would stand behind the open door of the room where they slept. She would come to bed and lay her clothes, one by one, on a chair near the entrance. He might look at his leisure. When she stepped from the chair to the bed, and he was at her back, he was to slip out. He must not let her see him go.

Gyges could not escape the order. He obeyed. He saw her enter and lay her clothes on the chair. As she went towards the bed he crept away, and she saw him going. She understood what her husband had done. She did not cry out. Among the Lydians, and among most peoples the Greeks called foreign, to be seen naked was a deep disgrace, even for a man. She held her peace, and decided that Candaules would pay.

TWO CHOICES, AND NO GOOD ONE

At daybreak she sent for Gyges, having first prepared the servants she trusted. He came, thinking she knew nothing. She set two proposals before him. Kill Candaules, and take her and the kingdom of Lydia. Or die at once, so that he would not again see what he ought not to have seen, in obedience to Candaules. Either the man who planned it must die, or the man who had seen her

and done what was not decent.

Gyges begged not to be forced to the choice. She would not be moved. He saw that he must kill his master or be killed. He chose to live, and asked how. The attack, she said, would be made from the very place where the king had shown her naked, and it would be made while he slept.

That night she hid Gyges behind the same door and put a dagger in his hand. There was no leaving. One of the two men had to die. When Candaules slept, Gyges came out and killed him, and took the woman and the throne.

Historian's Note: A story about looking

Herodotus tells this without lingering. The shock is not the body. It is the use of it. Candaules treats his wife's privacy as a possession he can lend. She treats the looking as an injury that must be answered in blood. Gyges is the man in the doorway, ordered by one power and then by the other. The poet Archilochus of Paros, who lived about the same time, mentioned the deed. Herodotus is already doing what he promised: setting a version beside the fact that other people told it too.

THE ORACLE KEEPS THE RECEIPT

The Lydians did not all accept a murdered king. The two parties agreed to put the matter to Delphi. If the oracle named Gyges king, he would reign. If not, the power would go back to the Heraclidae. The oracle confirmed him. It added a line that nobody wanted to keep: the Heraclidae would be avenged in the fifth generation of Gyges. Neither the Lydians nor their kings paid the warning any notice until it was fulfilled.

Count forward. Gyges, then Ardys, then Sadyattes, then Alyattes, then Croesus. The fifth. The story of the doorway is not a side tale. It is the debt on which the rest of Book One is written.

FROM THE DOORWAY TO THE DEBT

Person	What they want	What it costs
Candaules	To be believed about his wife's beauty	His life, and his house's throne
Gyges	To refuse, and then to survive	His master, and a curse on the fifth generation
The queen	An answer to being shown	A dead husband, and a new king of her choosing
Delphi	To settle a civil quarrel	A confirmation, and a delayed revenge

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Gyges calls the king's order wicked, then obeys it, then kills the king to save himself. At which point, if any, does he become responsible?
2. The queen neither cries out nor pretends the injury did not happen. Why might silence have been the more dangerous choice?

3. Delphi confirms a usurper and postpones the punishment for five generations. What does that do to the idea that oracles are simply on the side of justice?

CHAPTER 3: THE HOUSE OF GYGES, AND A SINGER SAVED BY A DOLPHIN

So the Mermnadae held the throne. Gyges sent offerings to Delphi, a great quantity of silver and gold, and six golden bowls weighing thirty talents, which stood in the treasury people called Corinthian, though in truth it belonged to Cypselus. He was the first non-Greek Herodotus knows of who dedicated gifts at Delphi, except **Midas** of Phrygia, son of Gordius, who had given the throne on which he sat to give judgement. Gyges made war on Miletus and Smyrna and took Colophon. He reigned thirty-eight years, and did nothing else Herodotus thinks worth the telling. The inquiry has a ruthless edit. It keeps what carries the story.

Ardys, his son, took Priene and invaded Miletus. In his reign the **Cimmerians**, driven from their lands by nomad Scythians, poured into Asia and seized Sardis except the citadel. He reigned forty-nine years. **Sadyattes**, his son, reigned twelve. Then came **Alyattes**.

A WAR FOUGHT WITH FLUTES

Alyattes fought the Medes under Cyaxares, drove the Cimmerians out of Asia, took Smyrna, and was badly beaten at Clazomenae. He also inherited his father's war on Miletus, and fought it in a strange way. When the crops were ripe he marched in with pipes, harps, and flutes, men's and women's. He did not burn the farmhouses or tear off the doors. He destroyed the trees and the fruit, and went home. The Milesians held the sea, so a siege was useless. And he left the houses standing so that the Milesians would come out and sow again, and there would be something to ruin next year.

Eleven years of this. Two heavy Milesian defeats, one at Limeneion, one in the plain of the Maeander. Only the Chians helped Miletus, paying back an old favour. In the twelfth year the army set fire to the corn, and the wind carried the flames into the temple of Athena at Assesus. It burned to the ground. No one marked it. Then Alyattes fell ill, and the illness held. He sent to Delphi. The priestess would not answer until the burned temple was rebuilt.

Herodotus had this from the Delphians. The Milesians add that Periander of Corinth, friend of Thrasybulus, king of Miletus, heard the oracle and warned him. Thrasybulus gathered all the corn in the city, his own and everyone else's, into the market, and ordered a public feast the moment the Lydian herald arrived. The herald saw abundance and celebration, and reported it. Alyattes, who had expected a starved city, made peace instead, built two temples of Athena where one had stood, and recovered.

Historian's Note: Two versions, both kept

This is Herodotus working in the open. Delphi says one thing. Miletus says the peace also depended on a friend's warning and a staged feast. He does not smash the two accounts together into a single clean fact. He tells you who told him which. That habit (name the source, keep the disagreement) is why later writers both trusted him and accused him of being too fond of a story.

ARION AND THE DOLPHIN

Periander, son of Cypselus, was tyrant of Corinth, and the Corinthians, confirmed by the Lesbians, tell a wonder from his time. **Arion** of Methymna was the finest singer to the harp of his day, and the first man Herodotus knows of who composed the dithyramb, trained a chorus, and produced it in Corinth. He spent most of his life with Periander, then decided to sail to Italy and Sicily. He made a great deal of money, and hired a Corinthian crew to take him home, trusting Corinthians above other men.

Out at sea they plotted to throw him overboard and keep the money. He begged for his life and offered them the fortune. They would not take it. He must die, they said, or throw himself over if he wanted a grave on land. Driven to it, he asked to sing once more in full costume, standing on the after-deck, and promised to kill himself afterward. They agreed, glad to hear the best singer alive. He put on his robes, took his lyre, stood at the stern, sang the Orthian nome, and when it ended threw himself into the sea as he was, costume and all.

The crew sailed on to Corinth. A dolphin, the story says, took Arion on its back and carried him to Taenarum. He went ashore and made his way to Corinth, still in his singing robes, and told Periander. The tyrant kept him under guard, disbelieved, and watched for the sailors. When they arrived he asked after Arion. They said he was well, left behind in Italy. Arion stepped out in the same dress he had worn when he leapt. They were caught, and could not deny it. A small bronze figure of a man on a dolphin stood at Taenarum, dedicated by Arion.

Herodotus does not say he saw the dolphin. He says the Corinthians and Lesbians tell it, and that there is a dedication. Believe the wonder, or believe that a famous singer survived a robbery and that a city liked the better story. He gives you both the tale and the little bronze.

THE MERMNADAE, TO THE GENERATION DELPHI NAMED

King	Reign, as Herodotus gives it	What he keeps
Gyges	38 years	Delphi's gifts, Colophon, the curse
Ardys	49 years	Priene, Miletus, the Cimmerians in Sardis
Sadyattes	12 years	The start of the long war on Miletus
Alyattes	57 years	The flute-war, the burned temple, the peace
Croesus	the fifth	The man the warning was waiting for

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Alyattes burns crops and spares houses so that the enemy can plant again. Is that restraint, or a colder kind of war?
2. Thrasybulus wins a peace by showing a herald a feast. What does the trick assume about how kings get their information?
3. Herodotus reports the dolphin story and the bronze offering, and does not say which proves the other. How should a reader hold a story like that?

CHAPTER 4: CROESUS, SOLON, AND THE HAPPIEST MAN

Alyattes died after fifty-seven years, and **Croesus** inherited a war with Ephesus and a kingdom that already reached farther than his fathers'. He attacked the Ephesians first, and they ran a rope from their walls to the temple of Artemis, putting the city under the goddess's protection. He subdued the Ionians and Aeolians of the mainland one by one, on different pretexts, real where he could find them and thin where he could not. He planned ships against the islanders, and dropped the plan when Bias of Priene (or Pittacus of Mytilene, for the accounts differ) told him the islanders were buying horses to attack him on land. Croesus was delighted by the absurdity, and the visitor said: exactly; and what do you think they feel, hearing you mean to meet them at sea? Croesus, who was no fool except in the ways that mattered, made a treaty with the Ionians of the islands instead.

In time almost every people west of the Halys was under him. Sardis was at the height of its wealth, and the scholars of Greece began to arrive, among them **Solon** (*SOH-lon*) of Athens, who had written laws for his city and then left for ten years so that no one could force him to change them. He came, in Herodotus's account, to see the world.

COUNT NO ONE HAPPY UNTIL THE END

Croesus entertained him, and on the third or fourth day had his servants walk Solon through the treasuries. Then he asked the question he had been waiting to ask. Solon had travelled. Who was the happiest man he had seen?

He expected the answer to be himself. Solon named **Tellus** of Athens. Tellus had lived in a flourishing city, had fine sons, and lived to see children born to each of them, and all of them survived. He had a comfortable fortune. He died beautifully, by an Athenian's measure: in a battle at Eleusis he routed the enemy and died in the fighting, and the Athenians buried him at public cost where he fell, and honoured him greatly.

Croesus, annoyed, asked who was second, quite sure of the place. Solon named **Cleobis** and **Biton**. They were Argives, strong, and prize-winners, and the story told of them was this. There was a festival of Hera, and their mother had to be drawn to the temple in an ox-cart. The oxen were not back from the field. The young men put themselves under the yoke and hauled the cart forty-five stades to the sanctuary. The whole festival saw them. The men congratulated them on their strength. The women told their mother she was happy in her sons. Standing before the image, she asked the goddess to give them the best thing a human being can receive. After the sacrifice and the feast they lay down in the temple and did not wake. The Argives set up statues of them at Delphi.

Croesus was angry now. And my happiness, he said, you count as nothing beside private men? Solon answered that the divine is jealous, and likes to trouble what is human. In a long life a man sees and suffers much he would rather not. Seventy years come to twenty-six thousand two hundred and fifty days, and not one of those days is like another. The fortunate man is not the rich man. Wealth lets you ride out a disaster and satisfy a desire; a poor man cannot. But the lucky man

must also end well. Until a man is dead, hold back, and do not call him happy. Call him lucky. Look to the end of every matter, to see how it will come out. The god has shown many a man a glimpse of happiness and then overturned him.

Croesus sent him away, thinking him a fool, a man who threw away present good and told a king to wait for the end.

Historian's Note: Did Solon really visit Croesus?

The dates are awkward. Solon's reforms and travels sit earlier than Croesus's reign in most modern reckonings, and later writers already suspected the meeting was too perfect. Herodotus may be using a famous wise man to stage the argument the book needs: prosperity is not happiness, and the end has not happened yet. Whether or not the conversation occurred, it is the moral engine of the Croesus story.

THE BOAR, THE GUEST, AND THE SPEAR

After Solon left, a vengeance from the god fell on Croesus, as Herodotus tells it, because he had thought himself the happiest of men. He dreamed that his son **Atys** would be killed by an iron spear-point. He had the young man married, kept him from campaigns, moved the spears and javelins out of the men's rooms, and stacked them where they would not fall on anyone.

While he was arranging the wedding, a man arrived in Sardis under a pollution. He was **Adrastus**, a Phrygian of the royal house, who had killed his own brother by mischance and been driven out by his father. Croesus purified him in the Lydian rite and took him in.

Then a great boar came down from Olympus in Mysia and tore up the fields. The Mysians asked Croesus for his son and a picked band. Croesus remembered the dream and refused to send Atys. The young man heard, and came to his father. Hunting was not war, he said. What spear-point was there in a boar? Croesus confessed the dream. Atys answered that a boar has no hands and no iron. The dream had spoken of a spear-point. Croesus was persuaded. He called Adrastus and asked him to watch over the boy. Adrastus did not want to go. He was a man in misfortune, and he had no wish to be seen among lucky young men. He went because a guest cannot refuse the host who purified him.

They found the boar and ringed it. Adrastus threw his spear. He missed the boar and hit the king's son. So the dream was fulfilled, and the killer was the man Croesus had purified, the guest he had sent as a guard.

Croesus, when the news came, was wild with grief, and called on Zeus of purification, Zeus of the hearth, and Zeus of friendship, because the same guest had violated all three. When the body was brought in, Adrastus stood before it, stretched out his hands, gave himself up, and begged to be slaughtered over the corpse. Croesus pitied him, though his own sorrow was as great as any man's. You are not to blame, he said. Some god is, who warned me of what was coming. Adrastus waited until the funeral was quiet. Then, judging himself the most ruined of men, he killed himself on the tomb.

Croesus sat in his grief for two years. Then the rise of Cyrus, son of Cambyses, and the overthrow of Astyages, woke him. He would stop the Persian growth if he could, before it grew greater. The end Solon had told him to wait for was already walking towards Sardis. He did not yet know its name.

SOLON'S RANKING, AND WHY IT OFFENDS A KING

Rank	Who	Why Solon counts them happy
First	Tellus of Athens	A good city, living sons, a fine death, a public grave
Second	Cleobis and Biton	Strength used for their mother, and a death the god gave as the best gift
Not yet	Croesus	Richer than both, and still alive, so the story is unfinished

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Solon refuses to call a living man happy. Is that wisdom, or a way of never having to praise anyone who can hear you?
2. Cleobis and Biton are given death as the best gift. Do you accept that ending as happiness, or does the story only work inside a Greek idea of fame?
3. Croesus tries to outwit the dream by keeping iron away from his son, and then sends the son out with a man carrying a spear. What does the story suggest about trying to dodge a warning?